The Man From UNCLE

The Final Affair

Unpublished Novel
by
David McDaniel

Man From U.N.C.L.E #24

THE FINAL AFFAIR

by

David McDaniel

Dedicated to Sam Rolfe and Norman Felton —
for a hell of a good idea.

And to
Terry Carr, without whom, etc.

FINAL AFFAIR — flyleaf :

The author wishes to thank the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, without whose co-operation this series could never have been written, and to extend special thanks to agents Andante Nemo (Section 2, Number 11) and Vaughn Carazini (Section 2, Number 2) for permission to adapt from their personal files. For further information on the operations of the United Network Command, do not contact Ace Books, Inc. Write instead to:

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INSIDE BLURB :

IT’S CLOBBERIN’ TIME!

The nightclub brawl had followed Illya into the kitchen.

The biker they called *Thing* slammed through the swinging door behind him and roared, “Hey, Blondie — I wanna talk to you!”

A cycle chain, slung like a bola, tangled Illya’s ankles and he fell against a table. He clawed the chain free and flung it straight at the grinning unshaven face of its owner. Sharp links drew blood where they slashed the hairy forearm.

Thing staggered back a step to an aluminum sink behind him, turned and gripped the edges. His tendons stood out like granite ridges until with a terrible creak and tearing sound there was a roar and a white fountain of water from ruptured plumbing as snapped pipes belched hot and cold.

He pivoted mightily and heaved the sink at Illya like a boulder.

FRONT COVER COPY :

The ultimate confrontation with Thrush in this last and greatest U.N.C.L.E. adventure by

DAVID MC DANIEL

BACK COVER :

(2" x 3" cut of Mr Waverly, formal portrait style, with 1/4" black border)

Caption: “Mr Solo, we are now preparing to strike the most damaging blow ever delivered to the very heart of Thrush — perhaps to destroy it completely.”

An U.N.C.L.E. bug planted in Thrush Central for six weeks had given Alexander Waverly enough information to risk the most daring attack ever attempted against Thrush — the hijacking of a Satrap Terminal and its use to tap the Ultimate Computer, the brain and central nervous system of the Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity.

Mr Waverly believed he had only to capture the elusive, continent-hopping, three-headed Thrush Central, and The Hierarchy would fall.

Little did he know what terrible secrets were hidden in the Banda Sea!

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THE FINAL AFFAIR

Darkness, and silence. The clammy smell of cold concrete.

After some indefinite time, the scrape of metal on stone and a glow of light faintly filling the arch of a yawning doorway from a descending ramp which curved upward out of sight. The dazzling spot of a hand-torch appeared in the opening, followed by two black-clad men, moving cautiously, each with a heavy satchel swinging by his side. They entered the large room, ceiling and end walls lost in darkness, and paused, sweeping the spot of light across a dark green wall.

One stuck a sheet of paper into the light, and a finger underscored a dimension line of the blueprint; the spot scanned leftward close to the floor, focussing on a covered heavy-duty electrical socket. Both men nodded. One set down his satchel and walked forward into the illuminated area, drawing a small tape-measure from his pocket.

Three full arm-spreads he measured along the base of the wall, then four feet straight up. A stethoscope unfolded from another pocket — he fitted the tips in his ears and set the cup against the wall at this point, then thumped the cement lightly with his fist in several places, shifted the cup three inches and tried it again.

Finally, with a felt marker, he marked the last spot he’d tested and stepped back, eying it speculatively. Meanwhile his partner set the torch on a folding tripod, adjusted its aim slightly, picked up both satchels and came forward into the light. He set both bags down close to the wall, opened one, and brought out a small electric drill.

When the man with the stethoscope stepped back and nodded, the other reached back into his bag. He pumped a small lever on a high-energy short-life battery, releasing the activating chemicals within; he checked the cable that led to the drill; after a few seconds he tested the trigger.

The motor began to respond sluggishly, then revved up to a high, muffled whine. He stood, and pressed the drill to the wall at the base of the inked mark. With a brief flurry of paint, white concrete dust began to sift down.

As he began work, his partner unpacked the other satchel. In a series of numbered plastic boxes components nestled in cotton, dark plastic modules with gleaming contacts and locking dovetails grooved into matching sides.

He sat down cross-legged, unfolded a sheet of paper, and began to assemble them.

The drill took about two minutes to sink six inches into the wall; the steady drone shot up in pitch as the bit punched through. Smoothly the tool was withdrawn and moved to attack another spot a foot up and to the left.

In fifteen minutes six half-inch holes had been lanced around a circle above the mark, and a seventh in the center. He leaned away from the wall and flexed his shoulders with a sigh and the motor whined down to silence.

During this time, the other man had assembled and broughtto life an irregular block about ten by twelve by fifteen inches, with tiny neon pips which glowed briefly as his fingers moved over its surface, checking the intricate circuitry one last time and activating certain control mechanisms.

After the last hole had been sunk, he dug into the bag which held the power supply and brought out two small electric saws. He took the warm drill from the stretched arm of his partner, disconnected its cable and stowed it away. He drew a second cable from the bag and connected both to the saws. Then he picked up one and inserted its long heavy blade into the bottom hole. The motor vibrated. to life and white dust spurted out as he started a cut diagonally up towards the next hole.

His partner breathed deeply and rubbed his right shoulder, flexed his neck, cracked his knuckles, and picked up the other saw. With in a minute there was room for him to start at the base of the slot already cut and begin working in the other direction. The quiet stammer of the first motor faltered slightly and recovered as the second started, and white dust fountained down on both sides of the circle.

In five minutes there remained only a six-inch gap uncut at the top, and both stopped. One got out a long thin rod and thrust it through the center hole, then: twisted the end until it locked, spidery legs unseen clamped against the pieces of wall from inside. He gripped the rod as the other sawed through the last support.

As the mass of concrete broke loose, he pulled, jerking it out two inches as it dropped half an inch, then working it farther out. His partner put

down his saw and helped him pull it the rest of the way out, catching it as it came free and. between them lowering it to the floor.

Between outer and inner walls a heavy structural brace fitted, its top level with the bottom of the hole they had cut. Some jelly from a finger-burst pod was smeared along the upper surface of the short metal beam, and the quiescent block of dark plastic was lifted into place on it, neatly centered and settled. Then the final button was touched and a small square of wire grid extended towards them on the end of a slender rod.

Leaving it dangling, they turned to other work.

Into an inflated tub they poured a gallon of murky liquid from a plastic jug. Then, attacking the slab of concrete with short heavy bars, they broke it into fist-sized pieces and tossed them into the tub. There the chunks softened, mushed, and were beaten into a dark grey pulp by the umbrella-like ribs of the device that had pulled the slab from the wall.

While it cured, the men took pressurized tanks from the bottom of the other satchel and sprayed from them a heavy white foam which billowed into the space: between the walls, hardening in seconds to surround the electronic block and its supporting member. As it bulged slightly out the opening they packed it back with their hands, leaving the stiff lumpy white surface about six inches inset from the surrounding wall. Simultaneously they worked the protruding rod slightly to assure it free play through the solidified insulating foam and positioned the small square of wire roughly even with the outer wall surface.

Then they slipped on plastic gloves and began to knead the grey mass in their inflated tub. The malleable, still-warm cement was picked up in double handfuls and slapped into the cavity, packed carefully from the bottom up.

In minutes the indentation was filled, flush at the edges and very faintly concave at the center where a barely perceptible inch-and-a-half square was barely visible. The heavy cracking bars doubled as squeegees to plane the face of the fresh cement as smooth as that surrounding. The color where they worked was a close match around the perimeter; slightly darker, but lightening perceptibly as they left it to finish drying and continued their task.

They disconnected the saws and brought out a small vacuum cleaner with a bag attached. Then while one folded the deflated plastic tub around a

congealing lump of extra cement and stowed it, the other picked up all the loose dust which had settled to the floor. He was not quite through when the hum of the powerful little fan wavered slightly and began to fall in pitch; before it died a minute later he managed to pick up all but a few stray grains. These he crushed underfoot and scattered.

He stowed the vacuum while his partner brought out two tall cans with spray nozzles. Starting at the center with a few squirts of paint to cover the metal square, he sprayed towards one side as the second can was employed towards the other. Around the edges the dark green was an almost perfect match; in three hours it would dry to an indistinguishable shade. They sprayed lightly along the wall parallel to the floor in random diminishing patterns to blend the edges of the new paint with the old. A horizontal visual cue is less obvious than a vertical one.

Even knowing where they had worked, both men silently agreed as they stood back and looked at their handiwork that the location had been completely concealed and camouflaged. One removed the light from its tripod and carried it back and forth, examining the effect from various angles of incidence; neither of them could be quite sure where the sensor square lay hidden behind a single thin coat of paint.

The other collapsed the tripod and slipped it back into his satchel, while his partner, with the light, scanned the floor carefully one more time. A crumb of concrete as big as a birdseed caught his eye; he stooped and powdered it between his fingers, blowing the dust into oblivion.

Then he rose, nodded, and picked up his satchel. The light swung around towards a wide, slightly oil-stained ramp which curved upward out of sight, and preceded them along it. Black silhouettes against the bent circle of light framed in the square arch of the doorway, they retreated, crepe-soled feet silent on the hard floor.

Total blackness returned by degrees as their light faded and was gone, leaving silence and darkness behind them, and a faint and fading smell of electricity, hot metal and wet paint.

It was just over two years before they returned.

SECTION I : “*Now Do I Prophesy A Curse...*”

CHAPTER ONE
“I Assume It Is More Complicated Than That”

Alexander Waverly motioned his two top agents to chairs at the big round black-leather conference table. “You seem in such excellent spirits — do you want to hear the worst part first?”

“Why not?”

“We’d like you both to go to San Francisco.”

“Not —”

“You will not be expected to contact Ward Baldwin during your stay there. In fact, it is imperative that he remain unaware of your presence.”*

**The Dagger Affair* pg.86, Paperback #4

Napoleon relaxed perceptibly. “In that case, it would be a positive pleasure.”

“You left rather more than your heart there, as I recall,” Illya said. “If that’s the worst part of it, Mr Waverly, the job should be a creampuff. Why send us? We have good people out there — why not use Baker and Glass?”

“They don’t have your background in heavy weaponry. Besides, they’re tied up in Los Angeles. You, Mr Kuryakin, should find the subject of your assignment most interesting.

“But before I continue there are a few top secrets you now need to know. For some time we have had a man deep inside the Thrush satrapy in San Francisco; how their security has been compromised for more than a year is rather a fine piece of work, which will be explained in detail to you by someone more qualified than I. Last month, this man reported to us the existence of a new and terrible weapon — a hand-gun of fantastic power.”

“Worse than the Particle Accelerator Rifle?”

“More destructive, smaller, and safer. Technologically, this is vastly more sophisticated. I presume you know what a ‘plasmoid’ is?”

“It’s a mass of ionised gas held together by its own electrical charge or something like that,” said Illya.

“Like ball lightning?” Napoleon asked.

“More or less. But since ball lightning was officially declared an unfounded folk tale for several decades, the naturally occurring plasmoid effect is now called *Kugelblitz*.”

“Which is German for *Ball Lightning*. Okay. Does this gadget shoot ball lightning?”

“The device is, in fact, called the *Kugelblitzgewehr*, commonly referred to as the KBG.”

“It would sound silly to call it a Ball-Lightning Gun,” said Illya. “You mean it *does*?”

“It has been reported to generate and launch plasmoids of varying size, range and power, depending on the report. We can tell practically nothing from what we have heard so far. You will meet a man in San Francisco named Harry Stevens. Learn from him what you want to know and tell him what you want to find out. His contact will be expecting you.”

Napoleon tapped the manila envelope which lay before him. “Data on the contact in here? What’s his position?”

“She is a dancer in a Greek restaurant on Grant Avenue. Her professional name is Little Sirrocco.”

“That’s Greek?” said Napoleon.

“No,” said Illya. “It’s San Francisco.”

“Miss Sirrocco’s relationship is known and approved by Thrush, and every effort has been made that it appear purely — ah — social, rather than professional. He had no intimate female friends during his first eight months with this Satrapy, which their psychologists would consider less than optimum. Hence their approval of this liaison.”

“Then he’s been with Thrush nearly two years,” said Napoleon. “But you said... Oh, I see! He sold out to *her*. I thought you said he was our plant.”

“Your first impression was correct. We originally placed him in the Satrapy. But he is unaware of his position, and thus cannot possibly compromise it. You might say his assignment is so secret even he doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Mr Waverly tapped a fingertip lightly on the table and looked at the clock. “Mr Simpson should be in shortly to assist in the technical portion of your briefing on the KBG — until he arrives, I might attempt an explanation of Mr Stevens’ condition.”

He fumbled a pipe from his pocket and reached for the humidor. “Initially, bear in mind that Mr Stevens is sincerely loyal to Thrush — almost all the time. Remember also that he volunteered for this assignment, knowing... at least some of the risks he would be taking.” He paused for several seconds, stuffing his pipe; he started to speak when he was finished, then thought better of it and took several more seconds to strike a large wooden match and ignite the packed tobacco.

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances, but neither spoke before the pipe was smoldering to its smoker’s satisfaction. Without looking up he addressed them again. “Mr Stevens voluntarily surrendered his mind, his character — his entire personality to total destruction and rearrangement. Since his programming was activated, he has been clinically insane.”

“Deep post-hypnotic?” asked Napoleon.

“Yes. He functions perfectly in a minor clerical capacity with a gold clearance, which gives him access to nearly everything. His memory of his life before two years ago, I am told, is spotty but adequate; he is happy with Thrush and completely loyal. But once a week he visits Little Sirrocco, who keys his lower subconscious and records his full report on anything new he may have observed or heard about, and suggests certain other things which we may want to know about. Then, during the following week and until satisfied or told to stop, he will unconsciously tend to seek out these subjects, and report on them at his next opportunity.”

“I see,” said Illya. “I assume it is more complicated than that.”

“Considerably. You will also meet Dr Grayson, the hypnotech responsible for Mr Stevens’ condition, and...”

The door zipped open and Mr Simpson joined them, white lab coat flapping about his lean frame. Mr Waverly returned to his pipe as the new arrival said “Good morning,” to Napoleon and Illya, took a chair at the table and looked expectantly at Mr Waverly. “You expect I wonder why you’ve called me here,” he said.

“We were just discussing our man in San Francisco,” said the object of his attention, amid a cloud of blue smoke.

“Oh, yes. The trance-suggestion case. Fascinating. I’d be interested to hear how he’s getting along. But I have a beaker simmering downstairs, so about the KugelBlitzGewehr — what would you like to know?”

“What it does and how, to start with,” said Illya.

“Ah. Well, we don’t know. In fact, we hope you will be able to tell us when you get back.”

“Then how about explaining what a plasmoid is, for us language majors in the audience,” said Napoleon. “How powerful is it and what kind of power?”

“Electrical, magnetic, mechanical and thermal. Especially thermal. If you take a quantity of gas and heat it to a ee where the atomic particles sss to disassociate and the substance ionises.

“How hot?”

“Oh, ten thousand degrees or so — you can have them as cool as seven thousand degrees, and there’s really no upper limit short of mass-energy conversion, which only happens inside stars. We don’t know yet, of course, what temperature the KugelBlitzGewehr generates. Oh, that’s ten thousand degrees Celsius, I should say.”

“Celsius?”

“Centigrade. The ionized gas is probably released with a spin on it, and since a moving electric charge generates a magnetic field it is temporarily self-sustaining. Surface turbulence tends to prevent the heat escaping, and its own field holds it together until something stops its motion.”

“Releasing the heat.”

“Releasing whatever volume of super-heated electrically charged gas went to make it up. If it was the size of a pinhead it wouldn’t last very long, and would likely burn a hole in your coat. Naturally they lose some heat, unless Dr Warfield has come up with a better way to hold them together.”

This time Illya interrupted. “Dr Warfield?”

“I’m confident this is his creation. He should be rather elderly now, but he has been involved in research of this nature for many years. Been with Thrush since a few years after the War. Decades ahead of his time.”

“Granting that this could be generated from a handgun, how would you project it? How far would it go and how fast?”

“Well, how far would partly depend on how fast, since they tend to cool off even before they dissipate. This is something else we hope you can find out for us in San Francisco.”

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other, then back to Mr Simpson. “I don’t even know enough to ask questions,” said Napoleon. “Is there anything else you can think of? If I have this straight, the thing should shoot

very bright balls of fire, likely somewhat bigger than a pea and maybe bigger than a basketball. These will presumably travel in a straight line away from the gun.

"Very bright indeed. And they might get larger as they go away."

"You might mention that anomaly of relative size versus energy," suggested Mr Waverly.

"Oh, yes. A larger plasmoid would not necessarily be more powerful; its destructive capacity would be more governed by the amount of energy stored in it — temperature, charge, turbulence, all would be more important than size. A film of this device in operation would be most informative."

"We'll do our best."

"If there are no more questions — by the by, did you see the report on the Thrush suicide corps? If not, look it up. I must be going." And so saying, he went.

"Indeed," said Mr Waverly. "San Francisco already has a few."

"I think I missed that," said Napoleon. "What was it?"

"They're called 'stim-heads'," said Illya. "Agents of no particular value whose services call for special rewards. Remember those wolves in Transylvania?* With remote-controlled cortical stimulation of pain or pleasure centers, they could be made to do all sorts of things. This is a little simpler, since it's designed to be plugged into a fixed installation and only stimulates the pleasure center of the cerebral cortex. It has a long technical name in Japanese — I forget the literal translation, but it means '*Once you've had it, you'll kill to get it.*'"

*_The Vampire Affair_, Paperback #6

"Reports on the few we've identified indicates they tend to wear their hair long - to conceal the terminal implanted in the scalp," said Mr Waverly.

"San Francisco is a city full of surprises, isn't it," said Napoleon.

"The surprises I worry about," said Illya, "are the ones we won't know about in advance."

"Those will be kept to a minimum," said Mr Waverly, "as long as Ward Baldwin has no reason to suspect you are in town. If you gentlemen can avoid attracting attention, for a change..."

"Believe me, sir," said Napoleon sincerely, "my deepest desire is to remain as far as possible from the mind of Ward Baldwin. I would wear a

false beard if I thought it would fool him. But he'd just make a snide remark about my costume."

"Forget Ward Baldwin," said Illya. "As I said earlier, this job will be a creampuff."

"Yeah. I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now." He stood and picked up his manila envelope. "But I guess that doesn't matter. Let's go."

CHAPTER TWO
“Little Sirrocco, How Do You Do?”

All nightclubs look alike during the day. Chair legs bristled from tabletops and the garish decor seemed tawdry in the merciless glare of a couple of thousand-watt lamps in standing birdcages in opposite corners. The faint chemical smell of cedar sweeping compound mingled with stale smoke and sweat left from the night before, and there was a tang of ammonia in the cool air somewhere. FM jazz was piped into the sound system, like a ghostly combo on the empty stage.

Napoleon and Illya looked around the place, having found the front door open, the checkstand deserted and the cashier’s desk unguarded with the cash drawer gaping empty. Behind a partition to the left they heard a telephone ring and a voice answer it; following the clue they found an office and a balding man saying, “— and the last show starts at 1:15. Thank you.”

He hung up the phone and looked up at Napoleon and Illya. “One of these days I’ll get a gadget to answer that. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Is Little Sirrocco here?”

“What for? You don’t look like fuzz.”

“We’re family Friends,” said Napoleon. “You can tell her we work for her Uncle.”

“Tell her yourself. She’s back in the dressing room, unless she left without me hearing her — cleaning up after rehearsal. I can buzz her.”

“Tell her we’re coming. Where’s her dressing room?”

“Around behind the stage.on your left. Green door with a gold star on it. Not the one with the gold crescent — some wiseacre put that on the men’s john.” He reached for a box with buttons on it as they left.

The corridor curved around behind the stage, and a door was open ahead of them. Inside, a girl sat at a dressing table doing things with her long blonde hair. She saw Solo in the mirror as he looked cautiously around the doorframe.

“Come on in and close the door,” she said. “This place is safe to talk — I can fill you in on the situation as it’s developed.” Her voice was soft

and husky, but her speech was crisp and precise.

Illya closed the door behind them as Napoleon pulled.a ccupic of folding chairs from a corner and sat down straddling one with his arms folded across its back. “Okay. Mr Waverly said you could bring us up to date on Harry Stevens and his current project.”

“Good,” she said. “That proves who you are. I was pretty sure. See, something came up and we’ve got a pickup for you to make in the next couple of days. You are Solo and Kuryakin, by the way?”

“None genuine without this signature,” said Napoleon, gracefully flipping out his gold identification card. Illya’s appeared beside it — Sirrocco looked at each a moment and then returned to her mirror and her comb.

“Okay. How much did Mr Waverly tell you about Harry’s condition?”

“The fundamentals. He’s running on a constant posthypnotic and you see him once a week.”

“Yeah. And when he reports in we can set him onto a specific track — which can get pretty complicated. You know all about the KBG?”

“As much as anyone outside of Thrush.”

“Somebody named Simpson back in New York was asking about anything that fired along with the fireball, like for sighting or ranging, and Harry found out there was such a thing. It’s like a laser, but not in the visible spectrum, and Harry said it ionizes a path in the air and the plasmoid runs down it. This came up day before yesterday when he came over to my place to report. So we set him to get one of those things and bring it to us. You’ll pick it up.”

“Pick it up? Why doesn’t he bring it to you next week?”

“New York didn’t want to wait. Harry can drop it off at a bar in North Beach. It’s all been arranged.”

“Just a minute,” said Illya. “I thought Harry didn’t know he was working for anyone but Thrush. You just gave me the impression that Harry was going to steal this — whatever it is — and drop it off at a place in North Beach for us to pick up.”

“That’s right. But he won’t know you’ll be there, and he won’t know why he’s doing it, and he’ll forget he did it afterwards. So it’s all okay. Didn’t they explain it to you?”

Napoleon stared at her reflection in the mirror, and his eyebrows rose.

“I don’t know exactly how it works, myself,” she admitted. “Dr Grayson can tell you. But when Harry gets this thing, he’ll signal me at my place around six-thirty or seven, before I leave for work. I’ll let you know when I hear, and you’ll plan to be at this place in North Beach. He’ll leave it in his booth and you’ll pick it up.”

“How big is it?” asked Illya.

“About three inches long and maybe as big around as a pencil.”

“And what does it do?”

“Well, it’s some kind of a Taser crystal. But instead of light it lases gamma: radiation. Not a whole lot — I think they said it’d just give you a quarter-inch-wide sunburn — but enough to ionize the air it goes through so the plasmoid, being electrically charged, follows the track. That’s as close — as I remember. Does it seem reasonable?”

“Completely,” said Illya. “And Mr Simpson wants the real thing so he can study its atomic crystalline structure, shoot some neutrons through it and see what it’s made of. I wonder what they use to drive it.”

“Anyway, after Harry leaves, you go to the booth, pick up the thing and come home. And that’s it. Nobody should be tailing him, and you can just stay out of sight if they are...”

“Tailing him? I thought he was above suspicion.”

“In this Satrapy, nobody’s above suspicion. I think Baldwin watches himself. Harry’s been followed a couple of times, even though they have absolutely nothing on him. He tests clean. He loves Thrush like a mother.”

“He must, if they let him get at something this important.”

“Well, he doesn’t have much rank, but he’s in the copying section. He’s cleared for just about everything, and his clearance gets him into places. See — there’s only one KBG, and that’s at their test site down near Gilroy. But there are replacement parts for everything, even parts nothing can go wrong with, like the laser crystal. And Harry can wander into Top Secret Storage and pick one up and it won’t be missed for months.”

“And all this time he’s loyal to Thrush,” said Napoleon.

“Uh-huh. That’s what makes things a little touchy. You don’t dare do anything that might disturb him while he’s around. See — he doesn’t really — know what he’s doing. But he can do everything right as long as he doesn’t stop to think about it, and he won’t as long as nobody calls his attention to it.”

“It doesn’t sound healthy,” said Napoleon.

“It isn’t,” said Illya. “But you’d be surprised how many people go around like that most of the time.”

“No, I wouldn’t. On the other hand, natural conditions are usually stabler than artificial ones.”

“That’s right,” said Sees. “He’d freak out. And we don’t want that to happen. Dr Grayson might be able to put him back together again, cue but some cracks might show. See, all I’m trained to do is cue him into a trance, debrief him into a recorder, play a tape of Dr Grayson telling him what we want him to notice and reiterating his basic programming, wake him up, pat him on the back and send him home happy. Since I’m the only field contact he has, it’s part of my job to keep an eye on his emotional balance. They say he has a chance of coming out of all this with his head in one piece, if nothing jiggers him badly.”

“It’s slightly reassuring,” said Solo. “I hope he doesn’t have a family.”

“No,” said Sirrocco. “Just me. And I’m not supposed to get personally involved. This is purely professional.”

“Uh-huh. Mee

“Partly for my own curiosity,” said Illya, “and partly on the grounds that knowledge is more useful than ignorance, what can you tell us about Harry’s condition? You mentioned he’d signal you when he got the gamma - Jaser - how does he do this?”

“He calls my home phone, and rings once...”

A pair of electronic birdcalls sounded softly, and Napoleon said, “I’ll get it.” He unclipped what looked like a fat silver ballpoint pen from inside his coat, twisted one end to extend a short antenna, and reversed the point to reveal the microphone/speaker. “Solo and Kuryakin here.”

“As soon as you have finished your briefing, please report back to the local office. This is of overriding priority.”

“I — ah — think we’re just about done here,” said Napoleon reluctantly. “Is this new development going to supersede our present assignment?”

“We don’t know yet. Apparently it’s much bigger. Mr Waverly is on his way from New York right now by courier jet; if you can manage to get here by six you can meet him and get right to business.”

“Good. Should we arrange to have dinner sent in?”

“We’ll take care of that. Off the record, I haven’t the least idea what this could be — but the tone of his voice sounded as if you could be at this all night once you got started.”

“Thanks. We’ll check in by six. Solo out.”

Little Sirrocco finished sorting her hair, mist-green eyes darting back and forth from her own reflection to Solo’s and Illya’s as she tucked it through a band and tossed it. over her shoulder.

“I gather they may have to send in the second team,” she said. “Good luck, fellas, but I guess that’s war.”

“We may still be here to handle the pick-up,” said Illya. “If the drop is on for tonight, you’ll still check in and they’ll have to send someone.

We might be out in time, and I would like very much to observe this programming in operation.

“Okay,” she said, standing and slinging a rough leather bag over her shoulder. “If I see you again, that’s cool, and if I don’t, hang in there.” She fumbled in the bag until she found a pair of opaque plastic glasses, and gestured with them towards the door. “I have to head home now to wait for a phone call.”

As she locked the dressite room behind her she called up the corridor, “Hey, Spiros!”

A faint “Yeah?” came from beyond the stage wall.

“I’m checking out — see you about eight. These two guys are leaving with me.”

“Okay,” answered the distant voice. “Why don’t you use the call box? All the money I paid to put it in and you gotta yell!”

“I already locked my door. G’bye,” she called, and pushed the pand unbar of the fire exit, opening into an airshaft with golden afternoon sunlight spilling in at the top and filtering down over trash cans and sooty brick walls. “You parked off Grant? Go out that way. I catch a cable at the top of the hill.”

“Can we give you....”

“Thanks, no. You go check in. I get around okay on my own.” And with a swirl of her hair and a flicker of hip, she was gone.

“Miss Sirrocco needn’t have heard about this,” said Mr Waverly, “but no harm is done. You will not be abandoning your assignment immediately at any rate — for that matter, the entire operation centered around Stevens may shortly become obsolete.”

“You mean he may be relieved — or he may be killed?”

“Not precisely. He may be out of a job. For that matter, we all may have things a bit easier in the near future.”

They looked at him, then at each other. “I beg your pardon?”

Mr Waverly smiled. “I believe it would not be too rash to say that we are now preparing to strike the most damaging blow ever delivered to the very heart of Thrush. If you fulfill your duties well in the next few weeks, we may have an opportunity to cripple the organisation — if not to destroy it completely.”

They stared.

“A long-range project was begun some three years ago,” he continued, reaching for his humidor, “while you were short-circuiting a nasty situation in the Middle East. I’m sure you remember that week.”

“Clearly,” said Illya.

“You went there from England after meeting that Rainbow chap.”*

**The Rainbow Affair*, Paperback #13

“That business about the robbery was never settled either, was it?” said Napoleon. “That whole affair seemed unresolved, I always felt. We were off our stride.”

“We did well enough in the war afterwards, I thought,” said Illya.

“Your work there was most satisfactory,” their commander said. “But your final report from London, filed between assignments, included information which correlated with some anomalous data we’d received from other sources and made me willing to invest some effort to take advantage of the revealed situation.” His pipe now packed, he searched for a match. “If you have nothing pressing, I would like to explain at length.

“Here we have Thrush Central, housing the Ultimate Computer and in constant communication by remote terminal with every Satrap in the world.

“And over here, several thousand miles away, is a complete duplicate set of hardware, with most of the files copied on its tapes, warmed up and waiting with a staff of forty or fifty sitting around playing cards. And

thirdly, yet another full set of staff and equipment is en route from one location to another, where they will re-assemble and activate their own Thrush Central. With consideration of several constantly changing factors, probably including a random variable generated within the Computer itself, on a given signal everyone in the second, or stand-by, Central assumes their stations and all available communications channels are utilised at high speed to transfer every remaining bit of information from the first set of machinery into the second. Simultaneously, all functioning channels are switched to the second site, which then becomes Thrush Central, and the third unit goes to stand-by status.

"This accomplished, the first group packs up everything — Section Three tells me all their equipment is *modularised* and *containerised*. Loathsome neologisms." He sucked at his pipe and sweet blue clouds rose around him.

"They load into trucks, onto railroad cars, aircraft or boats like a travelling theatrical troupe and are carried to another location, also chosen by the Computer, where they set up, realign and test the entire system, and signal that they are ready to assume stand-by status.

"Sometime after this, the active Central transfers control to the third full unit, which went on stand-by when the second took over. At this point the first would become the stand-by unit while the second broke down and moved to another location. Do you follow me so far?"

"This is more or less what Johnnie Rainbow outlined to us, sir," said Napoleon.

"With the omission of the fact that the second unit already has all basic data and programs, copied into its storage banks when it went to stand-by," Illya added. "Takes much less time to update, since they only have to copy the active files."

"Our best estimates are that Central can perform a complete tranferral without dropping a decimal in well under sixty seconds in an emergency situation.

"Since any of the three units is capable of carrying the full operating load of Thrush indefinitely, it can sustain activities until the one in transit is ready to resume stand-by operation. Presumably, if a unit were actually discovered and destroyed, it would take some time to replace the staff and

hardware, but they could easily field a new functional unit within two or three weeks."

"Because all we can capture is the physical machinery which houses the information and the programs," said Illya. "The software can skip to anywhere in the world at the speed of light and leave us with blank iron oxide for all our trouble."

Napoleon raised an eyebrow. "You sound positively metaphysical," he said.

"This is the spirit of the machine, and it is not bounded by physical laws."

"Oh, but it is," said Illya. "Like any spirit, it's not much without a body to work through. All we have to do is capture all of its bodies, which are comparatively valueless, or prevent it from departing the ones we do capture. Remember, you were the one who suggested the metaphor."

"I'm sorry. But I believe Mr Waverly hadn't quite gotten to the core of his story. Thrush Central is as shifty as Percy Blakeney. Do you mean you have it located?"

"Not exactly. You see, something as large as Thrush Central requires several things in whatever site it may inhabit — besides open space and privacy, there must be electrical power, supplies of water, ready access to routes of escape by land, sea or air, and preferably enough innocent citizens coming and going in their immediate vicinity to cloak their own movements... this sort of thing. We had quite a search for qualified locations, and found a few that looked very likely indeed.

"Now I would be the last to demean Thrush security. We could not stake out a location and expect Thrush to move into it; any concealed transmitter would betray itself by its own emissions. Section Eight wasn't fazed by the challenge, as you might have guessed — they created a self-contained recording device which was indetectable in operation, totally shielded, signal-activated, with a capacity of nearly 1500 hours in two dozen multi-plexed channels.

"Lovely device. There were planted in a number of locations identified as likely sites for Thrush Central, in such ways as to evade detection by sounding, stress analysis, fluoroscopy or magnetic anomaly.

"The recording device was sensitive to speech sounds, of course; it also monitored a wide range of frequencies and was designed to pick up

certain types of signal flow by induction. The actual detection and storage techniques used are, I am told, quite sophisticated.

“The site was monitored circumspectly, by observation of water and electric. power consumption; when both rose significantly to a six-week plateau and then dropped again, we waited a short period and then moved in to retrieve our bug.”

“You mean it has already worked?” asked Illya.

“So far, yes. The original recording has been undergoing extensive analysis for over a month, and our own computer staff now feels capable of establishing communication with the Ultimate Computer, given two more things, which we hope you will be able to secure for us.”

“Following which,” said Napoleon, “you expect to be able to tap directly into Thrush’s brain?”

“Literally.”

“I’m staggered,” said Illya. “What is it we need?”

“My decision to act was spurred by the information that the San Francisco Satrap is about to have his obsolescent terminal replaced by a newer model.

With Mr Stevens’ help, we should be able to divert the old terminal to our own uses. Even so, we will also need one piece of information to go with it. Since all communication is routinely scrambled, an active terminal is maintained in synchonisation with the Ultimate Computer. Any attempt to engage through an unsynchronised terminai would set off a flock of alarms and the self-destruct mechanism in the terminal itself. Nevertheless, since humanity is fallible, occasionally interlock is lost. And a provision has been made for such an eventuality: there is a maintenance access code which, properly entered, allows re-establishment of synchonisation and identifies its user as a qualified entity for access to operational systems as well as to all data files.”

“You promised,” said Napoleon, “that we wouldn’t have to have anything to do with Ward Baldwin.”

“I said you would not be expected to contact him. Now it is even more imperative that he remain unaware of your presence. In all your activities, wherever you might be observed, avoid attracting any attention.”

“Of course. All we have to do is hijack his old terminal and run our man on a string into the middle of his operation. I’m even afraid to ride a

cable-car — I have the feeling the grip-men report to him."

"I have a false beard you could borrow if it would make you feel any better," Illya suggested. "You would have a false beard," said Napoleon.

"All your operations will be carried out circumspectly," Mr Waverly said. "You will meet with Dr Grayson a little later this evening; she will brief you on Mr Stevens' current condition and precisely what your job will entail. She'll be here at 7:30; we have time for dinner, I've taken the liberty of ordering it sent up, since I expect you will want to go over what we've already learned from our bug on Central." He handed each of them a fat manila folder, and they settled back to study.

CHAPTER THREE
“Hold My Hand”

“First, Mr Solo, I hope you understand that an individual under a posthypnotic suggestion does not necessarily wander about glassy-eyed like a somnambulist. Properly implanted, such a suggestion would not only be indetectible, the subject himself would probably be unaware of its presence.”

“Until it went into effect,” said Napoleon.

“No,” said Dr Grayson. “Not necessarily even then. The human subconscious is capable of fantastic feats of self-justification. If it lacks a valid reason for a course of action, it can supply a false one so smoothly the conscious: mind never notices. Competently handled by a stage hypnotist, a man may feel it is perfectly reasonable to get down on all fours and bray like a donkey.”

She was a handsome woman, perhaps forty, with a gentle throaty voice and short auburn hair. She sat with Napoleon and Illya in a quiet conference room down a side corridor in U.N.C.L.E.’s San Francisco office, detailing all they would need to know to react appropriately in any situation they might encounter with Harry Stevens. This included an outline of what he could be expected to do.

“About thirty minutes past midnight you will go to a bar in North Beach called ‘The Blue Angel’. Shortly before One, Harry will come in, wearing a dark brown corduroy jacket. He will go to the last vacant booth on the left. Do not make any attempt to contact him. At 1:12 by the wall clock he will get up and leave. The gamma laser will be wrapped in two paper napkins, tucked down between the seat and the wall on the side facing the door. If Harry is not being watched, one of you will retrieve the laser rod, the other will follow Harry and cue him into a cooperative state by showing him your U.N.C.L.E. communicator and saying the key word, *Basingstoke*. Understand, he must be allowed to complete his full program in the bar and leave before you interfere with him; it could be dangerous to break him in the middle of a cycle, even though it is necessary that he be intercepted tonight.”

“Basingstoke?” Illya asked.

“A sufficiently uncommon name, especially coupled with the sight of your transceiver. It won’t induce a trance state, but he will become quite docile and suggestible. Bring him to the Pell Street entrance before 1:30. I’ll be waiting there to take him over and implant the suggestion to seek out the specific Mantainance access code Mr Waverly wants so urgently. I will also see he is returned home safely before dawn.

“You understand, of course, this will be your action only if you are satisfied he is not under surveillance. If there is any indication he is being followed, you will make no move at all. Mr Waverly wants him re-programmed as soon as possible, but not to the extent of jeopardising his cover. We do have an alternate plan, somewhat less graceful, to get to Harry.”

“But we still pick up the laser,” said Illya.

“As soon as you feel it is safe,” she said. “If the drop is also under observation, forget it. I presume you are aware of the priority of this new assignment?”

“Yes,” said Napoleon noncommittally. “But I’d guess if he was being followed they’d be suspicious enough of him that his usefulness would be in question anyway.”

“Not necessarily,” said Illya. “According to all reports, he’s been doing a good job inside Thrush; they might just have a standard security team on him. They keep track of everyone as amatter of policy. But any attempt to contact him would not only blow his entire scene and his invaluable position, it would mean his life. Remember, Harry himself is not really aware of what he’s doing — is he, Dr Grayson?”

“Not on all levels, no. He shouldn’t notice a few oddities and blank spaces and inconsistencies — remember what I said about the human mind’s capacity for self-justification. He may only feel vaguely that *something* is wrong, somewhere...”

Harry had the vague feeling that something was very wrong somewhere. He’d given in to some questionable impulses in the past, but nothing as foolish as this. He’d resisted the thought for days — yet every

time he passed the Physics Lab storage room he remembered his one glimpse of that exquisite gleaming cylinder resting in red velvet, its perfect mirror-bright surface catching every light in the lab. Such a beautiful thing! It had caught his eye as he stood at the next table, and as he recognized it he had felt a surge of sudden desire such as a lesser man might feel for a woman. That slim glistening rod snagged his thoughts like a loop of flypaper.

He only intended to sneak into the locked storeroom and find the flat black case so he could see the gamma laser again, to compare its divine reality with the image he carried in his mind, but it was late afternoon before the opportunity presented itself. Operations closed down at five, and the Research section was deserted by 5:15. As staff copyist he was presumably free to check out when his work was done.

But when he opened the little case and actually saw it close up and felt its weight in his hand he started thinking. This was one of four spare units, besides one with the KBG; it wasn't as if it had to be right here and ready on a moment's notice; so just borrowing it overnight wouldn't even be treasonable — he certainly wouldn't do anything against the interests of Thrush, insofar as he understood them. It would be as easy to sneak it back in as to sneak it out — and then he could take it home, and sit down with all the blinds drawn and take all the time he would need to look at this impossibly perfect, beautiful thing.

It slipped neatly into his pocket and didn't even bulge. His heart beat a little faster as he checked out, nodded to the guard and took the elevator to the surface, where he emerged into the golden horizontal light of the setting sun. His shadow marched beside him as he walked south a block, then turned east. He didn't break stride or hurry at all until he got home. The case seemed to get heavier every minute for the last block, and he began to imagine someone coming after him. At last he closed the door behind him and set the lock. His flat only had a microphone planted; he wasn't important enough to rate a camera. Even at his level, the company bugs were common knowledge; he knew where his was and didn't particularly care.

Without even looking into his pocket again, he hung his coat over the back of a chair in the living room and went to mix himself a good stiff

drink. He turned the radio to KSFO and started to sort through the day's mail.

Like a child with a new toy, tantalising himself, he filed his gas bill and glanced through the latest ANALOG before starting his dinner. While it was heating he suddenly thought of Sirrocco. It'd be nice to have her over later this evening — though of course he couldn't tell her exactly why he felt so good. He picked up the telephone impulsively and dialled.

Even as he finished dialling he wondered if he should invite her over. After all, she might become curious or he might drop a hint accidentally. The phone clicked and the connection was made. If she answered, he'd have to explain why he was calling... The first ringing signal vibrated in his ear for two seconds, and in sudden decision he dropped his forefinger on the button and replaced the receiver. No, she shouldn't be brought over here while he had the gamma laser in his possession. The gamma laser...

The shades were drawn and the lights down, the FM supplying background music for the company bug — he turned the Tensor lamp on his desk to focus in the middle and went to his jacket.

The case was there, not quite small enough to fit between his hands. He didn't open it, but carried it like a baby to the desk and set it in the center. Then he turned on the lamp and squinted against the concentrated light before bending close and opening the catch.

There it was, the most beautiful thing in the universe. In pink distortion his reflection stretched along its side, and the high-intensity lamp was a tiny dazzle at its left edge. His eyes feasted on its consummate symmetries for minutes until the timer rang in his kitchen, announcing his meal was ready.

Unwillingly he broke the spell, closed the case and extinguished the light. He tucked the case out of sight under some loose papers and went to eat. Despite the music, his flat seemed oppressively quiet. He wondered if he really wanted to stay home for the evening, alone with his shining prize, or to go out on the town. There ought to be other people around for a celebration, even if they didn't know what he was celebrating. He could go to some bar where he wouldn't be known, and find a quiet back booth where he could take his trophy out again and look at it. He'd like to have Sirrocco along to share it with her, but he wouldn't dare let her know about it. It simply wouldn't be right to involve her in something like this — which

was, after all, technically illegal, and could get him a whole lot of trouble if it was discovered.

He thought about this while he opened a can of dessert and decided it seemed perfectly reasonable. He caught a bus at the foot of the hill about 9:30, after freshening up and changing clothes; the precious case now nestled lightly in his shirt pocket, under sweater and coat, next to his heart.

He changed to another bus a few minutes later and rode east towards the bright lights. He wasn't familiar with much of the north side of town except for Fisherman's Wharf, and the area beyond Chinatown was terra incognita to him. He got off at an intersection with an appropriate number of flashing: lights and went at random into a place called Dinky's.

It was noisy and crowded, and the lights were dim. He took a booth and ordered two drinks, but there was no chance of privacy and he didn't quite dare bring the case out of his pocket. He caressed its slick smoothness with the fingertips of his left hand after shifting it surreptitiously to a side pocket, and pictured the precious rod within.

Nobody had gotten off the bus with him, but he suddenly had the feeling he was being watched. He'd been there half an hour and hadn't noticed anybody eyeing him consistently — but then he hadn't been thinking about it. He looked around covertly.

The place was so dark he couldn't even be sure how many other people were there. He suddenly decided it was time to leave. He finished his second drink, picked up his jacket from the seat beside him, and found a cable car headed north. He boarded it alone, and clanged and clattered off into the night with twenty tourists around him.

A distant boat whistle hooted mournfully across the moon-silvered bay as they paused for a moment at the top of Hyde Street, then plummeted jerkily towards the waterfront below.

He walked east from Ghirardelli Square until another nightclub caught his eye, promising a floor show and assorted distractions; inside he found a resonably secluded booth and. brought out his little treasure. Under a shaded lamp, his body concealing it from the outside, he released the catch and looked at the gamma laser for the first time in nearly two hours.

As he studied it he started to wonder whether he had really done the right things. Technically he had stolen this from Thrush, which wasn't good — he intended to return it, but what would happen if he were caught with it

when he tried to take it back? His hand started to shake, and he gripped the edge of the table hard. He'd be in serious trouble. After all, this was not just Thrush property — this was part of one of their more secret weapons projects and as such was subject to certain security regulations. To have violated them, even to this extent, would be grounds for severe disciplinary action. There wouldn't be any way he could convince them he'd only wanted to borrow it for the evening to admire it, and that there had never been any danger of it falling into the hands of anyone qualified to recognize it, let alone care what it was.

It looked like a rod of mirror-finished steel, 3/8 of an inch in diameter and three inches long. He couldn't see his reflection in the general dimness, but the slim shadowed cylinder itself seemed to have changed subtly. Its beauty was now somehow menacing. He had stolen from people who trusted him, and how could he hope to keep it secret from them indefinitely? If they suspected him, he would be followed...

Without undue haste, he put the case away and took a sip of his drink before glancing around the floor of the club. Nobody looked like anyone he'd noticed at the last place, and nobody could have followed him on the cable anyway. He glanced at his watch. It was just short of twelve, and he really didn't feel like leaving... Just then the lights dimmed around the small stage and a lime spot picked out an MC in skin-tight pants and a sequined jacket introducing a line of chorus girls. Harry decided to stay for the midnight show.

It was worth the two-dollar cover that had been tacked on his tab unexpectedly, but he left hurriedly after the show and another drink. He wasn't cheered by the songs and dances, and the flat box in his lefthand pocket weighed on him like a millstone. He was now convinced he had made a horrible mistake and would appear irretrievably guilty of treason while unprovably innocent of any wrong intent. Driven by a compulsion he could not have described, he fled into the night and was embraced by the cold streamers of fog.

"Maybe I just haven't spent enough time here," said Napoleon, "but I can't help feeling San Francisco's reputation for fogginess is greatly

exaggerated. It’s cold and clammy, and pieces blow through from time to time, but I’ve hardly ever seen really heavy fog here.”

The mottled sky overhead was paled with city-glow, but the gibbous moon appeared and faded, caressed by a hilltop to the west, and the lights beneath it were clear as they walked up from their car to ‘The Blue Angel’ at half past twelve.

“I can’t tell whether you’re appreciating it or complaining about it,” said Illya. “Do you wish there was more fog?”

“Not especially,” admitted his partner. “I just find it a little disappointing. Besides, we have forty-five minutes to kill, so I thought the weather might be a good subject to start a conversation with.”

The bar was about half full when they entered, but perhaps due to the lateness of the hour more customers were leaving than arriving. The two agents took an inconspicuous table in the corner where they could watch the front door and the back booth. Since their orders had included a repeated and specific injunction against attracting any kind of attention, they were informally dressed in the native style of turtlenecks and bell-bottoms, Napoleon with a mustard blazer and Illya in a dark green bush jacket. They ordered drinks and made idle conversation.

Gradually Napoleon became aware of an odd feeling of attentiveness in the room. He was sure they hadn’t been marked when they entered, but now interested eyes from the bar strayed their way more often, and seemed strangely to focus more on I1lya than on himself.

Unaware of this interest, Illya continued describing a particular chess strategy he had recently read about while Napoleon, half listening, stared past his shoulder and wondered at the inexplicable attraction he seemed to have.

Too many people were looking at them. Not with hostility, but rather with an opposite sort of look. Something had to be done, and until he knew what about himself and Illya — especially Illya — attracted their glances, he couldn’t tell what might be done. Then his eyes locked suddenly with those of a lean young man in leather pants and an open suede shirt, and held for a full fraction of a second.

“Illya,” said Napoleon under his breath, “in case you hadn’t noticed, we are uncomfortably conspicuous.”

“I’d noticed,” said the Russian. “Can you tell why?”

Napoleon thought a moment. “Illya,” he said finally, “we’ve been friends for several years now, right? Partners for six or seven years?”

“Six this fall.”

“It seems longer. And you’ve saved my life a few times, and I’ve saved your life several times ...”

“More or less.”

“And you trust me implicitly in odd situations.”

“As a general rule. Are you leading —”

“All I ask is that you trust me just this one time and I’ll try to explain later. Okay?”

“Okay...”

“Hold my hand.”

“Hold your —?”

“Please,” Napoleon whispered intently. “Trust me. Hold my hand for a few minutes. And smile when you look at me.”

“Well...” Illya extended his hand across the table and Napoleon took it. He looked defiantly along the bar and eight or nine pairs of eyes reluctantly returned to the big mirror on the wall behind the spigots and racks of multicolored bottles.

“Napoleon, I will take it on faith that you know what you are doing. But I must say —”

“Whatever you say, keep smiling while you say it. Look. Nobody’s watching us now. I promise I’ll explain it to you — but not right at the moment. Maybe tomorrow.”

“I trust your instincts, Napoleon — you’ve proven them often enough. But still, there are times when...”

“Hey — isn’t that him?”

A thin, dark young man with an intense, hunted look in his eyes and nervous energy in his movements ducked around the partition at fie door, nodded to the bartender, and walked unsteadily to the back booth on the far side.

Harry had been wandering aimlessly for some time, pausing now and then to check behind him, scanning anxiously over his shoulder, studying

thinning throngs against the chiaroscuro of colored lights. He was somewhere in North Beach, and it was getting late. He didn't want to keep walking much longer, but he didn't know yet what to do.

He couldn't keep it — he didn't even want it anymore. He needed to sit down and think about it for a few minutes. Any place would do... He looked up and with a moment's shock saw an angel waiting for him, outlined in flickering blue neon. Another bar. It looked open — he went around the partition and saw it was only about a qaurter full, with a line of private booths running back towards a rear door.

Casually and a little unsteadily, he walked in, nodded to the bartender who didn't notice, and made his way to the rear. A dyed blond young man in a tight sweater fetched his drink and left him alone.

Another minute or two passed, and another customer arrived, a young Falstaff in a flamboyant shirt and bushy red hair. He studied the room with a coolly appraising eye as he-wandered along the bar towards the back, finally taking a stool some twenty feet from Harry's booth. He asked the bartender for something in a low tone and nodded at the answer before ordering a stein of beer. Napoleon and Illya, themselves unobserved, watched as he nursed it, his eyes on the back booth either directly or in the mirror, for most of the next twelve minutes.

Nobody could see into the back booth, and Harry, oblivious to his surveillance, took the little case out again and opened it on the table before him. What. could he. possibly have been thinking of when he took this? It was a beautiful thing — still the most beautiful object he had ever seen — but hardly enough to risk his entire career and perhaps his life for. He had been incredibly foolish. And now what could he do?

It would be insane to try to return it — he would surely be detected. It would be dangerous even to take te back to his apartment. He had betrayed his trust for this worthless bit of metal, and he could think of nothing but to get rid of it. He ordered another drink, hiding it in his pocket until the waiter had come and gone.

He could throw it off the Bridge — but that was an awfully long way to go and it was late and cold, and besides, the Bridge was hard to get to on foot.

He could drop it in a trash can or down a sewer, but it seemed little less than blasphemous to treat this perfect, precious rod so badly.

For that matter, he didn’t want to have to carry it another step. Could he just abandon it here?

Why not? He could tuck it out of sight somewhere, and it might not be found until the building was torn down. Certainly they didn’t clean this place very thoroughly ... He looked around. What would be a good place? There was no room under his cushion — the seat was a solid unit all the way to the floor; the table stood on a central pillar and was bracketed to the wall. But on his right there was a gap of half an inch or more between the end of the seat and the cracked plaster wall. Plenty of space for the rod if not the case.

, But he couldn’t just drop the rod down there in all that dirt — it would be awful to mar that virginal surface. In quick improvisation he wrapped the napkins from his two drinks around the gamma laser and tucked in the ends.

Looking quickly around to be sure no one could see into the booth, he pushed the paper wrapped package out of sight — and out of his thoughts.

He stared at the empty case, gaping in mute reminder of his guilt, and quickly closed it. He couldn’t stay here any longer — he gulped the last of his drink, stuck the case in his pocket and left.

Napoleon and Illya saw Harry come out of the booth. He stood beside it a moment, pulling on his jacket, then walked unsteadily out of the bar. The young John Falstaff carried his remaining beer back to the booth Harry had just vacated, glanced in and was satisfied; he drained his stein and set it on the bar on his way out the door.

“So much for that,” said Napoleon quietly. “We will have to go to plan B, whatever that is.”

“I’ll give you odds that was one of them,” said Illya. “They get all the field work they can handle.”

“Stim-heads? I thought so the minute I saw him. Let’s pick up the baby and get out of here. Mr Waverly will have something else imaginative to hit us with in the morning and I wouldn’t mind getting some sleep. All that briefing for nothing.” °

“Well, we had a quiet evening out. We can report in, drop it off and check out for the night. But I wonder what is going on in Harry’s head right now ...”

A block away Harry chucked the plastic case down a storm drain. As it vanished forever into the darkness he felt a tremendous load lifted from him. Still, he didn't feel well — he'd probably had a little more to drink than he should've. He'd had two at each place, after all — and he hadn't even noticed the name of the last place he'd stopped. Well, he hadn't felt good all day.

He shuld go home and get some sleep. He was glad that business with the gamma laser was over and he could forget about it; he'd been pretty silly, was Jucky to have gotten away with as much as he had. Best to just forget. about the whole thing...

He dozed off in the bus on the way home, and only just woke up in time for his stop. He Had had too much to drink, he decided fuzzily, and wondered why he'd gone out in the first place. He seemed to remember he'd done something bad — he'd stolen something from the lab. Or had he dreamed that in the bus?

He couldn't really tell, as he stumbled up the steps to his flat. He didn't want to think about it, because it hurt. He undressed and fell into bed, to sleep the sleep of the damned.

CHAPTER FOUR
“Ready To Do It —”

“You mean he’s wired with a backup system?”

“Effectively. It would’ve been simpler if we’d been able to bring him in last night, but this is supposed to get the job done — and probably with a little less damage to Harry’s fragile mental condition.”

Napoleon and I1llya sat over spread sheets of the Sunday Chronicle, their U.N.C.L.E. Specials disassembled and a pack of linen rags between them. The office air conditioner strove in vain to pump out the heavy pungent odor of gun oil and solvent as they passed an idle hour stripping and cleaning their personal weapons in a quiet conference room, unused at this late hour. Napoleon Sighted into his muzzle, tipping the receiver to catch the light, squinting along the spiral grooves for any grains of foreign matter which had missed his energetic swabbing. “How does it work?” he asked. “A big black Cadillac with drawn curtains pulls up beside him on the street and whisks him away to an obscure fate?” -

“No, he comes willingly. You should know enough about Dr Grayson’s technique to be able to figure that out. Sometime early this evening Little Sirrocco called him up and in the middle of an apparently harmless conversation she slipped him the pre-arranged cue phrase, which triggers a series of sub-conscious reactions to bring him to her place within an hour or two. Then he’s debriefed, re-briefed, re-programmed if necessary, and sent out.”

“Uh-huh. He did volunteer, right?”

“It couldn’t have worked if he hadn’t. Thrush has the technology to mak it work, but it’s surgical, irreversible, and has several unpleasant side effects. I’d like to think nobody but they would use it.”

Solo snapped the slide closed and wiped his fingerprints off the metal. “What’s the key phrase she uses? Anything to justify the behavior pattern it initiates?”

“You might say so. I think it’s something like, *‘I’m lonely, big boy.’* She was going to call him about 7:30, which means he should be under at the moment. He’ll be sent home about half past two.”

“Shouldn’t we be there to participate in the briefing?”

“Napoleon, you want to be in on everything. Any extraneous presences would complicate Dr Grayson’s task. Besides, he might recognise us if he ever got a good look at us.”

“You’re being reasonable again. I just like to keep track of what’s going on. I presume we’ll be called if anything develops?”

“I have Mr Waverly’s word on it. After all, it’s only 11:00.”

. Napoleon finished repacking the kit and wiped his fingers fastidiously on a rag. “There are a lot of places I’d like to go and spend a couple of hours — no reflection on your company, but U.N.C.L.E. HQ gets pretty quiet between midnight and six a.m. If it wasn’t for the fact that Baldwin probably has bugs under some of the most interesting beds in San Francisco I’d be out investigating the Barbary Coast. Any ideas?” _

“Not while we’re collecting duty pay. I have a landlord to feed in Brooklyn Heights.”

“If you didn’t throw all your money away on riotous living, you mad Russian, you could afford to live as well as I do.”

“And you don’t have a cent put away, and your checking account runs into Ready Reserve about five times a year. You live like Aesop’s grasshopper.”

“While your savings balance as of last month was $14,582.07. Why don’t you buy stock with it or something?”

“It’s against my principles. Don’t you expect to live to retire?”

“I trust in Social Security and U.N.C.L.E.’s retirement plan. I’ll move to the Maldives, after sailing the Pursang around the world just to prove I can, and chase native girls until I’m shot by a jealous husband at the age of 102. I’m essentially a man of simple tastes.”

Illya scratched a speck from the white inset initial K in the broad square butt of his special, and didn’t look at Napoleon as he asked casually, “Have you thought about getting married?”

“Thanks awfully, but- it would never work. We come from two —”

“Cut it out.”

“Sorry. Actually I hadn’t thought about it. I wouldn’t say it couldn’t happen, but don’t count on it.” He fitted his Special back into its lowslung shoulder rig and worked it in and out a couple of times. “I’d demand a lot in

a girl. I don't really think I'd care to try it again. But look, are you really that interested in the $30-a-day bonus for the 24-hour alert scene?"

"You seem to know my financial situation better than I do."

Solo stood and stretched. "Same to you, fella. You spend 60¢ a day on transportation."

"The subway's convenient and it gives me something to do for twenty minutes while I'm waking up."

"Yeah. The spy who came in from Brooklyn — on the IRT."

Both communicators chirped in chorus, and Illya barely had time to react before Napoleon flipped out his silver pen, drew down the short antenna: and removed and reversed the upper point to expose the cylindrical speaker and mike. "Solo here."

The familiar gravelly voice of their commander filled the quiet room. "We have just twenty-four hours to prepare the strike. Baldwin's terminal is being moved between two and three tomorrow morning. We expect to have detailed plans for the operation by noon.today." . |

"Ah — tomorrow,. you mean," said Napoleon. "It's only 11:18."

"It is? My word, I'm still on New-York time. Thank you, Mr Solo. I've had other things on my mind. Apparently even Baldwin didn't know until early today; their internal security is quite respectable. Stevens reported, by the way, that Baldwin is rather upset by this replacement. His old terminal is done in walnut panelling to fit the general decor of his office, and he's seen a picture of the new design. He seems to have ordered a closet built to hold it and a secretary to operate it for him, and there's a rumor that he may refuse to use it himself even if Central orders him to."

"He could come up with a convincing reason if he wanted," Napoleon said confidently.

"What do we know about the method of transportation?" Illya asked. "Can they fold it up in a briefcase and silently steal away?"

"It's about the size of a steamer trunk — or a small refrigerator. Similar in design to a unit you two blew up at that prison camp in South America a few years ago, if you'll remember."

"I remember that very well," said Illya.

"You aren't likely to forget Salty O'Rourke, either," said Napoleon.

"This one," said Mr Waverly, "will be leaving Alamo Square in a panel truck, possibly for the waterfront, possibly for a helipad. Mr Stevens is

remembering at the moment."

"I think Plan A is the obvious and appropriate thing for the situation," said Illya. "We'll check their procedure if Harry can remember enough, look over their route for the best spots, and intercept them."

"Plan A takes about ten men, sir," said Napoleon. "And it will involve a lot of noise and some — special equipment."

"Do you know how many guards will be on the truck?" Illya asked. "We'll need the appropriate number of bodies to leave behind in the wreck so Thrush will be less suspicious of this admittedly unlikely 'accident.' Mr Simpson has already prepared a dummy terminal to leave in the truck."

"It'll be split-second timing," said Napoleon, "but we have all day tomorrow to rehearse. I think we should stay up late tonight going over whatever Harry tells us, sleep until noon tomorrow and we'll be ready to fight Thrush from midnight to dawn."

"Admirable, Mr Solo. We aren't likely to hear anything before two, when Dr Grayson will return with the tape of Stevens' report. I shall call you again when she arrives. Your strike team will be called from this office on a Y3K7 priority and ordered to you at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon. You will be sleeping in the quarters provided, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. And we'll be in the building waiting for your call."

"Very good. Waverly out."

Solo replaced his communicator. "Which leaves us two and a half hours to kill. I think the commissary still has coffee — or could we telephone for a - pizza?"

"Mushroom and sausage. Would you care for a fast round of Botticelli while we're waiting?"

"There's no such thing. Since I'm paying for the pizza, I'll start with an H."

"Did you ever go bowling in the rain?"

"That's an obscure way of identifying him, but no, I am not Heinrich Hudson."

"Did you write a famous essay titled *Notes On The Next War*, and a play... No, that'd tell you too much.

"*Notes On The Next War*? Ah..." They walked down the corridor to the security guard at Outer Reception Station One, who would be receiving a pizza in forty-five minutes, and gave him the extension of the lounge where

they would be waiting at the end of the hall next to the elevators, along with a five-dollar bill.

“Give up?” said Illya, as they started back up the hall. “Ernest Hemingway. Are you historical as opposed to fictional?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Were you... hmm... Were you the subject of Shakespeare’s only three-part play?”

“Come on — you can do better than that. No, I am not Henry VI.” (*)

(*) In answer to numerous questions: the rules for *Botticelli*, also known as *Culture*, may be found in most large books on games. The cycle of play is simple, as sketchily outlined above: data is gathered through yes/no questions whenever the subject fails to correctly identify a reference, until the assumed identity of the subject is guessed, in the same form. Unlike most Q&A games, both sides must work continually. SuperGhosts is an evolution from the well-known game of Ghosts, and was discovered to me by James Thurber. It is illustrated elsewhere. Admittedly, both play better with more than two. — D.McD.

Fog sifted through the dark and silent streets as a small force of men crouched motionless in the shadows beneath the concrete bulk of the Central Freeway where it crosses Hayes.They were prepared to go into action on three minutes notice anytime before dawn — or something might miss connections and they could never be called at all. Two miles away to the south an expendable tank truck waited in concealment, its diesel engine warm, its body filled with 2500 gallons of rocket fuel officially bound for a missle site in Marin County: and its cab empty but for a radio receiver and a few cables.

Behind the supporting pier immediately south of Hayes. two more vehicles waited — a panel truck, identical in most details to the Thrush transfer van, and an ambulance which held half a dozen corpses legally requisitioned from the Unclaimed section of the City Morgue. There would be little left of the panel truck when Thrush or the San Francisco Fire Department found it, but every effort was being made to insure that subsequent investigation would show everything that should have been there. Mr Simpson had sacrificed a malfunctioning PDP-8 calculator unit, a CRT with a burned- phosphor, a misaligned photo-printer and a captured Thrush terminal housing shell, all of which would leave convincing remains after a brief but intense cremation. The same could be said for the corpses, since the Thrush guards in the truck would be taken in peacefully and held

incommunicado until the entire affair was resolved. “Sometimes,” Illya had remarked at one point, “it’s inconvenient to be the ‘good guys’.”

Now both agents crouched in the rear of their panel truck, an open communicator lying on the carpet between them. Three-quarters of a mile away an observer stationed at a third-floor window was watching a pair of heavy doors which concealed the basement garage through which deliveries were made to the subterranean Thrush complex. His eyes rested in the rubber cups of a tripod-mounted pair of 10x80 binoculars focussed by the blue light of a solitary streetlamp on the enigmatic steel of the unmoving doors. A cigarette stump lay cooling in the ashtray by his elbow; a can of soda sparkled faintly in the silence.

The watcher blinked into the darkness. A line of deeper black had appeared between the slabs of dull metal, and as he stared it widened. He reached for his communicator, which lay open on the table, and spoke without removing his eyes from the lenses. “Open Channel R.”

Solo’s communicator chirped for attention and got it instantly as the distant watcher’s voice reported. “Biederman here. The door’s opening. I think somebody’s looking out. Be ready... There’s a car — the car. A blue Fiat with three men in it. They haven’t turned their lights on yet. They’re turning east — there go the lights. Stand by for the truck... I think — there it is. They’re waiting for the lead car to get to the corner. I can’t make out what color it is yet...

“There they go. And there go the doors. It’s a drab grey — pretty close to the ringer. Okay, go to it, you guys. I wish I was down there.”

“If I’d known, I would’ve been happy to trade,” said Illya. His own silver transceiver was assembled as he listened, and now he said, “Open Channel L. Stand by all points. Drivers, start your engines.”

For all its flexibility, Thrush had fallen into a habit pattern and Harry had known the regular route followed by such vital caravans; he’d picked up an occasional hundred-dollar bonus for riding in the lead car on previous occasions when visiting dignitaries or top technicians were being transported in secrecy. The armoured Fiat preceded the plain van by two or three blocks, and total radio silence was maintained between the two vehicles since even a scrambled signal can be triangulated.

The Thrush would drive down Hayes from Alamo Square towards the center of town, and turn right on Gough, which rhymed with cough, when

Hayes became one-way the wrong way immediately after passing under the freeway. They would jog right crossing Market and continue south on Valencia for two miles, then turn east again on Army, towards the Army Street Terminal. At each corner the Fiat would be out of sight of the truck for about fifteen seconds. This could be stretched to twenty without arousing suspicion, but no longer. And the U.N.C.L.E. ambuscade had a three-minute alert — of which barely two minutes remained.

Solo and Kuryakin, black-clad, stood in shadow against the soaring concrete piling, their three aides behind them. Beneath the next intersection, Hayes and Octavia, a two-man team was poised with tank and nozzles and respirators, ready to cloud the space immediately above them with rapid-dispersal gas. The duplicate panel truck waited behind the freeway pier, lights out and engine idling. Silence and wisps of drifting fog filled the street, but tension crouched in the shadows as the endless seconds passed.

Then the muffled stammer of the Fiat could be heard approaching and Solo murmured into his microphone, “Check Point One, are you there?”

“Here. They haven’t — There’s the Fiat. License JGB 817. Now crossing Laguna... Mark. And... there’s the truck. A-OK on identification.”

“Thank you. All points. This is target. Repeat, this is target. Ready to do it —” He drew back to invisibility as the Fiat cruised by, echoing between parallel concrete walls, its two passengers looking in both directions. As it turned the corner and passed from sight, he said, “Do it!” and slipped a re-breather unit over his face.

As the Thrush panel truck crossed Octovia, half a block away, colorless gas hissed out to fill the cubic yards between building fronts. The truck swayed unsteadily as its driver felt an overwhelming urge to sleep. A nylon landing net dropped into his path from above, anchored to the elevated structure which concealed the main U.N.C.L.E. force — the truck shouldered heavily into it and bumped to a stop as cables creaked and held.

Simultaneously the duplicate let in his clutch behind Solo and swung out into the street and around the corner, docily following an unsuspecting Fiat south towards Market.

The ambulance backed smoothly out of the shadows as the net was lifted from the nose of the truck. Napoleon and Illya were the first ones to reach the cab, dragging the drowsy Thrush out. The key to the rear door was in his pocket; as Solo fished it out and ran around to unlock the van two

rehearsed agents loaded a corpse into the opposite side of the front seat. Four sleepers were dumped out of the back of the truck and the prize was exposed, a desk-size unit four by three by two feet. Its screen and keyboard were tastefully hidden by a sliding walnut panel. Positive identification took only a few seconds in back while Illya replaced the driver in front; a couple boxes of carefully chosen junk were lifted into the rear as the terminal was hoisted smoothly out between two men, then the other grisly replacements took place and Napoleon slapped the side of the truck as his last scan over the interior showed everything his mental checklist called for.

"Key," said Illya, grimly ignoring his cold passenger, and Napoleon slammed the back door, locked it for the last time and tossed the key to his partner. If the impending holocaust lived up to its billing, no trace would ever be found of the key amid the remains of the truck, but both men were trained to situations where such details were the pivots of life or death, and the Thrush van was as perfectly prepared as forty-five seconds of professional care could manage before the Russian engaged its clutch and started off to catch up with where he was supposed to be.

Illya swerved past the Do Not Enter sign at the entrance to the next block of Hayes and raced two illegal wrong-way blocks before cutting right on Van Ness, straight across Market and south, parallel the routes their ringer and four blocks farther east, heading the van towards its rendezvous six minutes away. On Valencia, the Thrush-Fiat led the U.N.C.L.E. van south at the sober speed of thirty miles an hour while Illya raced down deserted Van Ness at seventy. The ringer would be out of their sight for another space of fifteen to twenty seconds at the corner of Valencia and Army. Up an alley nearby waited the tanktruck, its diesel turning over. A Section Three technician on a nearby rooftop held the remote control which would send the rolling bomb out to meet the truck which Illya drove, while the U.N.C.L.E. duplicate would vanish quietly.

His synchronized Accutron, matched to every other man's on the team, brought him to the shadowed side of the selected intersection with twenty seconds to spare. He took a few deep-breaths while waiting for the Fiat to appear and pass, its passengers still alert for any threat to their convoy.

The car made its left turn onto Army, and I1lya swung the Thrush truck out of the alley before his counterpart swung in.

Five seconds later he braked to a stop on his marks in front of a parking lot two buildings from the corner. Ten seconds, he'd dragged a lump of discarded meat behind the steering wheel. Fifteen seconds, and he was sprinting for the shelter of the alley with the sound of a diesel, gathering speed pounding at his heels. Twenty seconds, and a fist of concussion slapped his back as building fronts lit up before an impossibly huge yellow flare.

He almost stumbled as the shock wave punched past him, then recovered his long stride. His new shadow danced, black and elongated along the street before him as he staggered up to the U.N.C.L.E. van and was helped in as their engine revved up and they shot away up the side street while leaping flames licked against the sky behind them.

Illya found a communicator in his hand. ""Kuryakin here," he said. "Detonation successful. Do we have the merchandise we came for?"

"Indeed we do," said Mr Simpson's voice unexpectedly. "As well as I can tell in five minutes examination, we have accomplished all we could have hoped for this evening."

"Okay, that's it then," came Napoleon's voice. "Teams One and Two are relieved as soon as they have their areas secured. Illya, I'll see you back at the office. Everybody else — thank you. It's been a pleasure working with you. This operation is officially completed."

And in U.N.C.L.E's San Francisco communications room, Alexander Waverly leaned back from his console and smiled. The first knot in a fatal skein had been tied, and the web which might ensnare Thrush was strengthened. A chance encounter and an unlikely friendship had spun the first strands. three years ago, and now for the first time in nearly a quarter of a century he could almost foresee the beginning of the end to which his life had been devoted.

He smiled the smile of patience rewarded, the smile of the hunter whO has finally cornered the old grizzly, and began to pack his pipe.

CHAPTER FIVE
“Great Balls of Fire”

Illya got to see it the following afternoon. In twelve hours a mixed bag of technicians from Sections Four, Five and Eight had disarmed the autodestruct mechanisms in the Thrush terminal, and now it rested on a table in the basement laboratory of U.N.C.L.E.’s San Francisco office. No complex of cables sprouted from its comfortably paneled sides — only a single well-shielded AC cord which terminated in a standard two-prong locking plug. Instead. of the wall socket, this was plugged into the front of a tall wheeled rack which displayed eleven panels including three quite different oscilloscope traces. This rack was plugged into the wall.

Napoleon stood behind a white-coated technician, watching as she expanded a small portion of the complex waveform on the second ‘scope into close focus and made some notes. He stared over his shoulder for several seconds before he spoke.

“Is that signal going in or coming out?”

“It’s coming in,” said Mr Simpson, who had appeared quietly. “It’s part of a multiplexed carrier-current signal which can be received at least in the central San Francisco area — we haven’t started carrying the cermin’ around to find just how far the signal extends.’

“It looks like white noise,” said Napoleon critically.

“Well, it is, pretty much,” said Mr Simpson. Except mathematically. There are about fifty-channels, I’d guess, and they’re all scrambled.”

“But the system has a key which our computer can work out?”

“Oh, no. That would be simple. This unit has broken synchronization with the Ultimate Computer; effectively, it has been disowned. Any direct attempt to signal into the operational banks would result in the erasure of the terminal’s own working core, as well as triggering its autodestruct circuits.”

“That’s what we need the maintenance access code for,” said Napoleon accurately, if ungrammatically. “Well, Harry’s on the job. Are you ready to

start work as soon as you get it?”

“Well, I won’t be doing that part. Once we have communication established a Mr Gold will be taking over. My expertise gives way to his once you get away from how the machines think into what they think about.”

“Communication? Two-way?”

“Of course. We have to be able to tell it what we want. Otherwise all we could do with this would be tap Ward Baldwin’s private line to Central.”

“I can remember when that alone would have been worth all we’ve gone through,” said Napoleon, impressed. “Then they left the unit fully functional,” said Illya. “They didn’t disable it.”

“Tt wasn’t destined for the scrap heap; Thrush is never wasteful. According to Mr Stevens’ last report, it was to have been overhauled, reconditioned, modified in a few modules and sent to one of the eraene African Satraps.”

“But won’t anybody notice an unauthorised signal coming in?”

“They have no reason to monitor terminal channels — Central has nearly fifteen thousand anyway, some of which only call once a month. And security on the terminals themselves is much easier than questioning each call. Yes, it’s a weakness; it took us some effort to find it, and we hope to make the most of it.”

“Then the whole contents of the Ultimate Computer will fall into our hands like — like an egg?”

“Well, not that simply. Thrush doesn’t trust most of its own workers — which you must admit is reasonable — and the most interesting sections require the highest priority and the most obscure passwords. This is what Mr Gold will be doing for us. In the persona of a qualified and cleared Thrush system analyst, he will identify himself convincingly and proceed to talk his way into the vaults.”

“You’re anthropomorphising,” said Illya.

“A bad habit.”

“And the Ultimate Computer won’t get suspicious?” asked Napoleon.

“Remember,” said Mr Simpson, “a computer is an idiot. And a big computer is a big idiot. You just have to handle it more carefully.”

“And I suppose the Ultimate Computer would be the ultimate idiot,” said Napoleon.

“We hope so, Mr Solo. We sincerely hope so.”

Nobody heard from Harry all that day. Napoleon and Illya were called into Mr Waverly’s office late that evening to meet Mr Simpson again and view some ninety feet of Super-8 film shot by an agent near Gilroy.

“Miss Fletcher’s camera was over a mile from the Thrush test site,” said Mr Waverly, “and a lens of some magnitude was used. You will notice interference from atmospheric haze and several intervening trees; also the image is not as steady as we might wish. Several sequences have been analysed frame by frame for computer study, but I thought you might like to see the KugleBlitzGewehr in action.”

He dimmed the lights with a finger-touch, and the opposite wall lit up to display a block-lettered title with a long code number. It was replaced by a vertical white line which took exactly a second to cross the screen. Then, through blurred foliage, a group of men could be seen clustered around a lean deadly-looking device mounted on a tripod on a small concrete slab. A husky backpack with cables: running to the stock hung by its straps between the legs of the tripod, and another single line ran through a coil to a control box. The image jumped and the figures vanished. A second later something which was rather like a bubble and rather like the sun burst into existence at the tip of the tapering muzzle and spat away out of the picture in a dazzling blur of flame.

“Gawp,” said Napoleon.

“You can see that frame by frame if you’d like,” said Mr Waverly. “Here comes another one.”

It seemed to take about a quarter of a second to swell up to the size of a basketball and vanish to the left.

“Yes, I would,” said Illya.

The image flickered, and a streak of light appeared at the left and was sucked into the needlepoint at the center of a deep two-foot dish of clear plastic with wires laced through it; a few seconds later another was drawn after it. The picture flickered again and grain pattern suddenly appeared as a single frame was held. The wall darkened and brightened alternately four times before a spot of intense light could be seen at the tip of the muzzle.

“That would seem to be about half an inch wide,” said Mr Simpson. “The temperature is somewhere over ten thousand Celsius, but I can’t tell how far over. It could be twenty thousand.”

The screen changed, and a three-inch sphere of brilliance obscured the tip of the discharge point. Dark and light alternated again and the circle of burnt-out emulsion on the film doubled its size. On the fourth frame a globe a foot or so in diameter was only inches from the point and slightly elongated. On the fifth frame a streak of light ten feet long blazed beyond some bushes, flaring among the frozen leaves.

“It’s not really very fast,” said Mr Simpson. “The plasmoid has a peak velocity in the neighborhood of five hundred feet per second.”

“That’s still a little too fast to duck.”

“Well, it’s not really intended as an anti-personnel weapon. There is more film...”

The second fireball was launched again, followed some seconds later by a third. Then the scene cut to an awkward angle of a number of test walls — apparently brick, wood, concrete and stucco. There wasn’t much left of the wooden one, and the stucco was distinguished by shiny stubs of fused chickenwire which stuck out from its shattered edges. A piece had been knocked from the brick structure, and as they watched a ball two feet in diameter slapped into it and in a flare which fogged to the edges of the frame it vanished, taking a quarter of the wall with it.

“Could we see...”

“Certainly.” Time reversed, and a cloud of rusty fragments leaped together in a flash of fire which shot away to the right. Grain appeared on the screen for a moment, and the familiar light-and-dark alternation brought a fuzzy ox ball of brilliance into one corner of the frame.

“Notice it’s larger and travelling more slowly... Our photographer says the range was about one hundred yards. Nevertheless, I believe the temperature of the plasmoid is still over ten thousand degrees, though probably not by much.”

In the next frame a quarter of the wall was obscured but displacement was clearly visible in the brickwork pattern close to the edge of the burned-out part of the image. The third and fourth frames were both nearly transparent except at the corners, and the fifth was normally exposed with blurred fragments suspended in mid-air and black slag running shiny as oil

over the shattered edges of the wall. In two more frames the bits of brick were gone and froth was beginning to burst and freeze in the slag.

Normal speed was resumed, and with hazy telephoto unsteadiness they were shown four more impacts against the concrete wall, the third cracked enough loose to expose steel rods bracing the structure, and the fourth melted the exposed rods and blasted more cement loose around them. Then the film ran out and the room lights faded up.

A signal was flashing insistently at Waverly's elbow. He touched a button and said, "Yes?"

"*Sirrocco just checked in, sir,*" said a clerk. "*Stevens signalled her about six minutes ago.*"

"That's our call, I believe," said Napoleon. "By the way, where are we going this time? I hope you've picked a better location for the drop."

"Hm. There are perils in picking a site at random from the telephone directory. Yes, we have a meeting place of the highest character. The drop will be handled as before, with two or three minor variations in the floor plan — when you go to his booth after he leaves, the access code will be written on the inside of a matchbook and tucked behind the lamp on the wall just above the table."

"How soon do we start?"

"Shortly. It's only half a mile from here, but Mr Stavens is programmed to make the drop at 12:36 this time. Still, if you haven't eaten and would like to catch the midnight show, Jack Packard has recommended the Casa del Gato. I'm sorry dinner cannot come under your expense account, but the cover charge and one drink each would be deductable."

"Thank you, sir," said Napoleon. "I've got time to find a clean shirt downstairs. Ilya, do you think I need to shave?"

"I think you're beautiful just the way you are. Come on — I just realised I haven't had anything to eat since two o'clock."

CHAPTER SIX
It’s Clobberin’ Time!”

Unlighted doorways with heavy gratings across their shuttered windows lined the narrow alley; trash bins stood against the walls with garbage cans here and there among them. A flashing neon sign near the T-cross of another alley threw a wash of red across the building fronts and picked out the rough cobbles underfoot. The crude outline of a mangy-looking cat intermittently shone over an entrance, signalling any customers who might pass, but promising nothing.

Napoleon and Illya in California formal attire, with raincoats, sauntered down the sea-damp alley to pause beneath the blinking beacon. “*Casa del Gato,*” Napoleon read. “I hope we don’t need reservations.”

Pungent music welled out around the door as they entered, with the mixed scents of smoke, red wine and searing meat to fill nostrils sharpened by the chill night air. Inside a slender girl spun and stamped to the music of a gitano guitar, and a swarthy man with a gold ring in his left ear led them to a table in the shadows. *Biftek Barbados* and *Paella con Pollo* were accompanied by a Basque rosé and an impressive display of Flamenco talent, and most of an hour passed agreeably.

“Harry should be along in the next few minutes,” Napoleon remarked as he stirred a *cafe-con-leche*. The stage was dark again and an unseen guitarist wandered alone amid esoteric harmonies. “Do you think I’ll have time for a dish of flan?”

“It’s only a third past midnight,” said Illya over the last of his saffron rice. “You have fifteen minutes. And while we don’t want to appear to leave before we’re finished, we don’t want to sit over an empty table for any noticeable period. In other words, make up your own — ”

The door burst open with a crash that startled the cafe into nee and three burly unshaven men in tattered jackets shouldered in. More were visible crowding behind them. In the moment of stillness as the echoes of their entrance faded the leader roared, “T. Hewett, you ******!! We’re here to return your call!” He slapped the levi-jacketed giant next to him on the arm and said, “*Kill, Thing!*”

The gorilla-like partner leaped into the center of the room with an unearthly yell and kicked over the two nearest tables, scattering customers like pigeons. As the other two cleared the door, what appeared for one stunning moment to be a barbarian horde poured into the night club, torn leather jackets, grime-crusted levis and biker boots their uniforms.

Twenty, thirty, forty, Illya counted mentally as customers fled in all directions before the invasion. They kept coming in, the main mass in action within fifteen seconds, smashing chairs, kicking over tables and slashing the upholstery along the walls.

Their leader, having established himself, led a small charge towards a specific table where sat the object of his opening address, a lean, keen-featured man in a casual sport coat over a white shirt over a black turtleneck. This individual spoke briefly to his companion, a beautiful brunette in a silver lammé velvet pants suit; who looked coolly up at the advancing force, then opened her evening bag and flicked out a nine-inch switchblade. The main focus of hostility rose smoothly to his feet with the chair between him and the approaching bikers.

He handled himself like a professional, but somehow Napoleon Solo didn’t like the idea of twenty to one. A cashier was frantically jiggling the hook on her dead telephone as Napoleon suddenly got up from his table and started forward.

“Where do you think you’re going?” said Illya, catching his arm. “If you get into this you’ll be noticed. Thrush is just as likely to have Harry followed tonight as they did two nights ago. Maybe more likely. Do you want to blow this whole scene?”

“But...” Napoleon stopped, one hand on the wrought iron railing that separated their table against the wall from the main floor. The man, presumably Hewett, stood with his back to the matching railing at the frontof the low stage. His hands gripped the top of a chair, and it was obvious without a spoken threat that the first arms and legs to reach for him would be broken. His companion remained seated, and had not opened her knife, but she eyed half a dozen hairy brutes on her side of the table, and none of them wanted to be the first to move.

Halted, several detached themselves from the fringes of the pack and started around onto the stage from both sides. A score more were content

with systematically smashing the front of the club, ripping fixtures from the walls and slashing drapes and pictures.

Napoleon looked at Illya, then back at the stage where a deadly drama was developing. "Call HQ and have them call the police riot squad, code three. Call anonymously. I can't stand here and watch this — just don't tell Mr Waverly!"

He vaulted over the rail and leaped to the stage, grabbing at a piece of wrought-iron decoration as he landed. He stumbled and a two-foot section with a twist in the middle broke off in his hand. Three bikers turned to face him. "Keep out of this, you *verbing adjective noun*," one of them warned.

"You don't have more than a couple minutes before the riot cops get here, punk," snapped Solo. "Do you want to leave walking, riding, or being carried?"

The unkempt biker laughed, a snort of derision. Then with a crash battle joined on the main floor. There were other knives in evidence, but the very press of numbers around Hewett prevented more than half a dozen coming within attack range of him. His stance was still solid, with a leg from the now-broken chair in each fist, and from his cohled crouch a hand or foot could dart and strike between thought and deed.

A long rip in one shoulder of his light jacket had laid bare the skin and a trickle of blood welled forth, but his breathing didn't seem hurried and his hair was undisturbed. He balanced like a dancer, holding off the first rush with the help of his companion, who stood straight and silver as a sword blade; a steel sliver stood from her dainty fist and its point flickered like a flame in a breeze — a respectful circle drew back from its bite, but a charge of animal rage was moments away.

Not all the clientele were huddling towards the exits — several otherwise unconcerned citizens had stayed to join the brawl. Most of them seemed unexpectedly able to take care of themselves against the undisciplined biker gang — experienced-looking men, several with scars of more than age, and cold professional eyes — but one or two were unlikely allies. A plump little man with grey at his temples wielded a neatly furled umbrella like a rapier, jabbing at faces and stomachs with the grace of a trained fencer; at his back a taller man who looked like an out-of-condition executive distinguished by the white forelock on his otherwise black head swung a chair.

“Hiram,” he gasped over his shoulder, “are you sure we should stick around?”

“You wanted to come here, Clarence,” said the other, before lunging forward to half-impale a sweaty sternum.

The detachment expected to surround the embattled pair had been delayed by Napoleon more than ten seconds before the U.N.C.L.E. agent finished his repartee with the biker stud, who laughed and said, “No fuzz coming here, man. Sparky:pulled the phone wires. We got five or ten minutes. You wanna go-round?”

“How many of you does it take to pull down a man?”

“As many as it takes man — there’s lots of us.” He lunged suddenly for Solo and a heavy waterglass hurtled out of nowhere to burst against the back of his head. His footing vanished and Napoleon sidestepped as he flew past with an inarticulate cry and shot full length off the stage.

During the moment his two cohorts took to react, Napoleon cracked one across the shins with his iron rod and just managed to ram the second in the pit of the stomach as he leaped forward. Now five more were coming towards him.

The first in the pack was floored by a heavy pitcher which entered the scene stage right along a parallel trajectory to that of the preceeding glass.

Napoleon glanced beyond him to see Illya in mid-air between their table and the back of another biker who was borne to the floor and did not rise again. Then Illya was on the stage with his partner and their battle was fully joined.

They had the stage cleared in the matter of a minute, and held the position for most of another minute until a wail of sirens pierced through the din and brakes squealed in. the alley outside. Four masked and helmeted patrolmen ran in, batons at ready, cans of assorted incapacitants at their belts. Two were on the floor amid rubble before they had taken three steps; one was holding his own against five but more were leaping to join them. The fourth backed hastily out to call for reinforcements.

“Napoleon,” Illya yelled over the general noise, “I think this is getting out of hand. Unless you want to be arrested along with everybody else, we should begin to disengage. Besides, I’m allergic to tear-gas.”

The half-circle around Hewett. and his striking friend had dissipated, tempti away by the prospect of policemen to loot, and the center of the

brawl - had shifted to. the fallen guardians of public order. Suddenly the two men from U.N.C.L.E. found themselves with nabody to fight. The erstwhile target of the bikers' wrath stared after them for a moment, then the girl looked down at her silver velvet suit and swore a longshoreman's oath. "They spilled the *Chateau d'Yquem* all over my panné!"

Hewett turned to the team behind him on the stage and nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Care to go another-round?" He indicated the embattled officers with a toss of his head. Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to his companion. "You can sit this one out, Kish," he admonished her, then picked up a fresh chair and darted forward like a cat. Napoleon started to follow, and Illya grabbed him by the shoulder.

"*We're not supposed to be noticed!*" he hissed. "Harry's not going to walk into the middle of this. If anybody spots us and Baldwin hears and this project is blown, Mr Waverly isn't going to care if I did my honest best to stop you and failed — he'll have us both cataloging fingerprints in Kansas City for the next five years! A full riot squad will be here in a matter of minutes — I saw the fourth officer get outside to call for help. Now will you put down that crowbar and come the hell with me?"

"Not for a minute," said Napoleon, pointing at the front door with his crude jag-ended weapon. "Look Here comes Harry."

There in the doorway, staring uncertainly around him, was the man they were supposed to meet — inconspicuously.

"Let's go get him," said Illya. "Everything is waiting for the key word locked up in that scrambled head."

"Just walk right out there and get him? I thought you didn't want to be noticed?"

"We'll stay close to the wall. In the middle of World War Three, who's going to notice?" The Russian started towards the low railing along the forestage, but even before he could vault that barrier, Harry's presence registered on the fringes of the main riot, and their mission became one of rescue.

The night club was a shambles. Only one table was still upright and unbroken, and it had been swept clear when. the tablecloth had been ripped off to serve as a makeshift sling for hurling ashtrays at the overhead lights. Hewett had sprung into the fray armed as before, and nearly a dozen floored figures lay as testimony to his speed and dexterity; fists and chains and

bottles, furniture and bodies flew about him but he dodged among them unscathed as though possessed of some extra-sensory radar. He didn't seem to notice Napoleon and Illya making their ways around the edges.of the fray.

'It took most of a minute. to traverse the margins of the dance floor, and Harry had scarcely been standing in the doorway ten seconds before the struggling mass threw out a pseudopod and dragged him in. The two men from U.N.C.L.E. were still forty feet away when the entrance improbably opened again and a pair of familiar faces stared in: .one was that of the Falstaffian individual with bushy red hair who had followed Harry. to the Blue Angel and had noticed neither Solo nor Kuryakin; the other belonged to Bruno, Ward Baldwin's chauffeur.

Napoleon joined his partner on the floor behind a table. "They didn't see us — I think the fight may hold their attention."

ITllya nodded. "They're looking for Harry."

"So are we. But —" Harry, his shirt torn and his nose bleeding, staggered out of the mob

and fell over a chair-to: land across the upper edge of the toppled table which concealed them; he hit hard and slid to the floor. Still conscious but obviously dazed he opened his eyes and stared directly into the face of Napoleon Solo a foot from his own.

Slowly his expression.changed and he started to shake his head. "No," he said under his breath. "Solo. No. I'm..." He shook his head harder and managed to get his palms against the floor and brace himself. "No!" he said vehemently. "*No! No! No!*"

Napoleon grabbed for him a moment too late. Harry was on his feet, unsteadily, and heading for the kitchen exit with the beginnings of hysteria in the incoherent cry which trailed raggedly behind him.

Illya's eyes were elsewhere, peeking around the other corner of the table towards the center of action. At the moment the two Thrush seemed to care little for anything but their own immediate survival; Bruno had been foolish enough to pull a gun and had had it taken away from him unceremoniously by a shirtless and tattooed weapons collector who then proceeded to teach him a few things. The red-headed Falstaff was equally involved, but doing better. Neither seemed to be concentrating on the kitchen exit or to be at all aware of Harry's precipitous departure.

Fortunately someone else was.

“We’ve gotta get Harry!” said Napoleon, grabbing Illya’s arm. “I think his head-glue is softening.”

“Huh?” asked Illya perceptively.

“Harry! I think he recognised me, and he didn’t look at all well, even apart from all the blood.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Kitchen.” Napoleon took off, running in a crouch for several feet, hugging the sparse concealment of spattered furniture until he picked up his stride into a sprint for the back door. Illya was close behind him.

“Hoy, Thing!” somebody yelled. “There go the two guys from the stage!”

Illya ducked through the door last. Steel tables and racks gleamed in the steamy deserted kitchen, and Napoleon was already out into the alley.

The swinging door slammed open behind him and a voice roared, “Hey, Blondie — I wanna talk to you!”

An instant later something bit into his ankles and tangled them, and he stumbled, catching himself on the edge of a counter — a bike chain had tripped him, slung along the floor like a bola. He clawed it free and flung it back at the grinning unshaven face of its owner.

Thing caught it across a raised forearm, though the sharp links drew blood where they slashed the hairy muscle. He staggered back a step to an aluminum sink bolted to the wall behind him, as Illya gathered himself for a rush. Feeling cold metal under his hands, the biker turned and gripped the rolled metal edges. He flexed his knees, and tendons stood out like granite ridges until a terrible creak and tearing sound gave Illya a momentary impression his bones were snapping under the strain — then there was a roar and a white fountain of water from the ruptured plumbing in the wall as snapped pipes belched hot and cold. Swinging the metal sink like a hollow boulder, he pivoted and flung it at Illya.

The Russian watched his timing and leaped out of its path an instant before it struck a steel table with a noise like all the garbage cans in the world being emptied at dawn. A two-foot frying pan hung polished on a hook close to the business end of Illya’s arm; it described a short arc terminating in a musical but unresonant sound before the sink had stopped rolling, and Thing stared at him until Illya began to wonder if he was going

to have to hit him again before he would fall. Then the stare began to go out of focus, and he gave an oddly gentle sigh, as he teetered and went down like a felled tree.

Outside, Solo braced Harry up against a brick wall and waved the silver communicator before his face. “Basingstoke, Harry. Basingstoke! Come on, Basingstoke!”

It seemed to be helping — he’d stopped struggling so hard, but he was half-sobbing incoherently as he stared at the communicator. “Harry, don’t worry. You’ll be okay with us,” Solo said soothingly as he relaxed his grip a bit at a time. “Harry, we’re going to take you out of here and home again. You’ve got something you were going to leave inside there, and you know I’m supposed to get it. You can give it to me now — it’ll be okay.”

Harry wasn’t sure. He looked at Napoleon, and shook his head slowly — not refusing the request so much as willing himself to reject Solo’s presence entirely. “It’s... it’s... my pocket...” He gestured weakly and leaned against the wall.

A flock of sirens faded up in the near distance, heading for the front door of *Casa del Gato* as Illya pushed the back door closed and propped a garbage can against it. “Let’s get him to the car. Harry, you’re going to be all right.”

For some reason Harry started to giggle hysterically at this. He laughed and sobbed quietly halfway back to the office, then went to sleep before they arrived. Dr Grayson was waiting for them, and she took him away.

CHAPTER SEVEN
“SYNLOC / TESTOK”

“O.”

“T, after.”

“H, after that.”

Downstairs intellectual excitement raged in a quiet room as twenty expert cyberneticists and qualified kibitzers stood around their very own almost-working Thrush satellite terminal; up on the sunroof Napoleon and Illya, who had been ordered to go somewhere else and relax, reclined, tense, on deck chairs and played endless games of SuperGhosts, having found themselves unable to muster the concentration required to sustain play in Botticelli — in the first half-hour each of them in turn had forgotten the character he’d picked.

“N on the front, just to be different.”

Illya tapped his fingers lightly on the arm of his chair. “That gives me N-O-T-H, which looks like nothing, if you’ll pardon my saying so. Put a P in front.”

Napoleon opened his eyes. “Pnoth?” he said, “wasn’t he the ancient Egyptian god of hubcaps or something like that?”

“That would be a proper name. P-N-O-T-H to you.”

“Same to you, fella. Are you bluffing again?”

“No, I just enjoy English orthography.”

Solo sighed and leaned back. “I’ll challenge anyway. I can’t top that.”

“I could have given you H-Y-P-N-O-T-H, for that matter, if I could add two letters. *Hypnotherapy*.”

“I thought we’d agreed not to mention that.”

“You spelled half of it.”

“Uh — forty percent. And I didn’t know what I was spelling at the time. Do you think that set of phoney memories Dr Grayson set up for Harry will really satisfy Thrush?”

“If it satisfies Harry, it’ll satisfy Thrush. But I’m not sure how satisfied Harry will be.”

“I got the impression he isn’t going to want to think about it much.”

“No. Dr Grayson planted blocks and suppressions all around it.”

“The same kind of suppressions you’d have to pay a shrink seventy-five dollars an hour to dig out?”

“Identical, but artificial rather than natural.”

“It doesn’t sound healthy.”

“It isn’t,” said Illya. “But when that sort of thing occurs naturally, it’s in response to something in the environment — like a scab forming over a wound, or your white-cell count multiplying against an infection. The difference is that it doesn’t go away. It’s a learned reaction pattern to something. And in Dr Grayson’s technique, since she knows exactly where all his buttons are, she will theoretically be able to take them all out again when he no longer needs them, and leave not a wraith behind.”

“Theoretically. He didn’t seem very sharp when we put him on the bus for home at 4:30 this morning.”

“A few hours’ sleep will do him all the good in the world.”

“I wouldn’t mind some myself. I’ve been a busy boy. You don’t suppose —” He answered the intercom in the middle of its first beep. “Solo here. Are you open to the public yet?”

He covered the mouthpiece and said, “They’ve got it going. It’s not ready for general exhibit, but we’re invited to a demonstration of the progress they’ve made in the last twelve hours. Downstairs, right now.”

Illya was at the elevator and signalling for a car as his partner said, “Thanks, we’ll be right down,” and hung up. The doors opened; Illya stepped in just ahead of him and punched the bottom button.

Downstairs nearly everybody in the world who knew about the kidnapped terminal stood in professional silence around the small room watching an operator test the keyboard. Neat green block letters glowed on the screen as Napoleon and Illya entered quietly and stood next to Mr Simpson.

After a few seconds Napoleon whispered, “On behalf of everyone who doesn’t know, what’s going on?”

“They’ve achieved re-synchronisation, and they’re working on Net Reconciliation at the moment.” Mr Simpson indicated a slender young man

with curly black sideburns and quick nervous movements, standing uneasily behind the operator. “Mr Gold is our chief systems programmer directing this operation. He’ll handle the terminal himself once NetRec is verified, which should be shortly.”

Napoleon peered at two six-letter groups on the screen. “And what does *that* mean?”

“SYNLOC / TESTOK means that synchronisation has been locked and will be maintained continuously until the unit is unplugged; and that the unit is ready to be tested without any danger from the integral destruct mechanisms. There wasn’t anyway, since we disconnected them, of course.”

Mr Gold looked up, recognised them and came over. “Hi there,” he said. “Thanks for all this — looks like it’ll be worth it. Did anybody tell you what we’re going to be doing?”

“Only vaguely,” said Illya.

“Once we get all the access lines straightened out, I have to try and convince UlComp that this unit is supposed to be undergoing certain modifications in its top secret data access channel, and so naturally we have to keep testing this facility. For the same reason, we can put in an order that any faulty signals coming from this unit are to be reported only to this unit instead of setting off all sorts of alarms.”

“That seems perfectly reasonable,” said Napoleon.

“It’s stupid,” said Mr Gold. “I could’ve written them a system that would have prevented this — at the very least they should have a human guard to clear top secret access.”

“Overconfidence,” said Illya.

“Overcomputerization,” said Mr Simpson.

“Mr Gold, it’s ready for you now,” said the operator, looking back over her shoulder and starting up from the chair. The screen now showed an additional legend: ULCOMP NETREC had a line to itself and below it, in case there was any doubt, green glowing block capitals said UNIT CLEAR.

“Thank you, Miss Klingstein.” He held the chair as she rose, and then took her place. He drew a pad of data sheets from a thin folder and opened it to the first page of illegible pencil notes, then laid it on the desk beside the keyboard, flexed his fingers and wiped his palms on his shirt, then aglanced up at Mr Simpson and grinned quickly before starting to tap out a

series of meaningless numbers and letters. The screen reacted with gibberish of its own.

Mr Gold studied it for several seconds, and nodded. There wasn't a sound in the room above the soft endless rush of the air conditioner and the subliminal hum of cooling fans in the equipment rack. He spent another second studying his notes and nodded again, then blanked the screen and typed something else.

"How long does this go on?" Napoleon whispered to Mr Simpson, who shrugged.

"A day," he said. "A week."

"A month, a year?" Illya quoted under his breath.

"I hope not."

"But we aren't likely to see anything more exciting if we stick around now."

"Not unless we overlooked an infernal device and the terminal blows up."

Napoleon looked at his partner. "It's not the sort of thing I'd care to wait for." Ilya nodded, and glanced inquiringly towards the door.

Outside the Russian said, "I should have realised it would take some time to actually get into it. After all, stupid as the Ultimate Computer basically is, you could hardly expect to walk up to it and say, 'Good afternoon, I'm the new janitor — would you tell me where the top secret files are kept and let me clean them out?' It takes a certain amount of lock-picking, even if you can convince anyone who finds you that you are a janitor, and just by *being* a janitor the alarm systems ignore you while you're picking the lock."

"Because they have such a great alarm system, they use cheap locks," Napoleon suggested.

"That's a good analogy. Offer it to Mr Gold when he comes back to earth."

"Okay. Which leaves us with one problem: while half the technicians in the United Network Command are taking apart the gamma laser we brought them and the other half are invading the nervous system of Thrush through a door we brought them with a key we brought them — what do we do to keep busy in the next day, or week, or month or however long it will be until something definite happens? You're a nice guy, Illya, but if I have

to spend another three days sitting around looking at you I'm going to start climbing walls. If I could just get out and wander around San Francisco for six hours a day I'd be happy — but here we are, under effective house arrest except for special occasions because nobody's supposed to have any idea anything's happening."

"Napoleon, I'm quite surprised at you. Weren't you and that Korean code clerk rather a pair? And what about Jennifer, down in Translations?"

"Kim was new here and hadn't heard, and Jennifer was just curious because she'd heard so much."

"Heard?"

"It's been — what? Four or five years? — since that DAGGER Affair, but every now and then somebody remembers to tell all the new girls about what happened to us. And after that they tend to giggle at me."

"Well, Napoleon, you knew the job was dangerous when you took it. Have you thought of talking Mr Waverly into allowing you a few hours a day outside on your own? If you went between, say, ten in the evening and four in the morning — and maybe a false moustache and glasses would help..."

They stepped into the elevator and the doors closed behind them.

Napoleon was allowed his first liberty that evening, checked in nearly an hour late, and slept like a boulder until noon. I1lya had taped a note on his mirror inviting him downstairs to the terminal test area, but he picked up his extension and called instead. In a few seconds the Russian answered.

"What's going on?" Napoleon asked. "Are they into anything?"

"A lot of confidential bookkeeping records which will probably prove very interesting once they're analysed; they'll all be copied out onto our own tapes while Mr Gold goes on investigating through another channel. It's like drilling holes in a wine keg."

"I should think the guard would get suspicious if the janitor was drilling holes in the wine kegs when he's supposed to be cleaning out the top secret files."

"I beq your pardon?"

“Never mind. I just got up. Is there anything going on down there interesting, educational or comprehensible?”

“Not really. I just find the atmosphere intellectually stimulating. Why don’t you go back to sleep?”

“Because I’m up and hunary. When your massive intellect has sated itself, bring your body up to the Commissary and join me in a plate of steak and eggs.”

“That sounds messy. Fifteen minutes?”

“Closer to five.”

“See you there.”

Little Sirrocco called on an emergency line about seven that evening. a Worried about Harry after his misadventure three days ago, she had telephoned his apartment and gotten no answer. On a hunch she’d phoned his landlady to ask if she’d seen him, and had been told that two friends of his had stopped by with his key, told her he’d been called out of town for a couple of days and had asked them to pick up a few things to send him.

“Do you think they’ve killed him?” she asked Mr Waverly bluntly.

“Of course not,” said Waverly. “They obviously do not intend to do anything violent to him — it would have been as easy to say he would be away two weeks or a month, and delay any suspicion by a much greater factor. Or simply arrange an accident. Most likely they want to talk to him uninterrupted — or it may even be that he has been called out of town for a few days. We shall check into this at once, Miss Sirrocco, and if he is in any danger of exposure you may be sure we will spare no effort to rescue him. More specifically, Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin will spare no effort.”

“I don’t know what I think about that. You’ll call me if you find out anything.”

“Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin may appear somewhat unconventional, Miss Sirrocco, but I assure you.they are among my most competent and consistently successful agents.”

“Well, somebody-at the office told me about an affair here a few years ago...”

“I’m sure even Joe Namath strikes out occasionally. You understand that Mr Stevens’ security is of paramount importance to us for very practical reasons, and as soon as you disconnect I shall personally investigate the situation-with every facility at hand. Now if you will permit me.”

“Well... okay. Call me if you find anything out?”

“Goodbye, Miss Sirrocco.” Mr Waverly’s finger dropped on the cutoff button, lifted, and signalled the terminal test area.

“Mr Gold? Waverly here. Can you read from local records of Thrush? Good. I need to know as quickly as possible the present location and/or disposition of an employee of the San Francisco satrapy, one Henry Eugene Stevens. — Stevens with a V. Thank you.”

Again the gnarled finger depressed the cutoff and released it, then switched to the paging channel. He called, “Mr Solo, Mr Kuryakin — report to my office at once, please.”

Upstairs in a lounge Napoleon looked up from bleak contemplation of some report or another, and the light was suddenly back in his eyes.

CHAPTER EIGHT
“Oh, We Had To Carry Harry...”

“Mr Stevens was taken into the Medical section about two o’clock this afternoon for ‘extensive psychological testing,’ according to their own confidential records,” said Mr Waverly. “This means he will be checked over this evening, kept under deep sedation overnight, and then tomorrow morning —

“They begin to take his head apart,” said Illya.

“We cannot afford this. Dr Grayson assures me that while her implants are proof against any standard technique short of a really perceptive Rorschach test, deep hypnoprobing could lay the entire substructure bare in a matter of hours. In short, gentlemen, you must recover Mr Stevens.”

“Where is he?”

“Inside Thrush’s San Francisco office under Alamo Square.”

“*Inside* —?”

“Mr Gold had acquired the full security layout of the Alamo Square complex, and a full-color printout is being prepared for you at the moment. You will doubtless have some locks to pick and some alarm systems to contend with, but I’m told that every wire, every sensor and every warning signal is indicated alona with its parameters and limitations.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Mr Solo, I am no such thing. If you are to have any hope of success on this impossible mission you must know every detail of the fortress you must breach.”

“But sir,” said Illya, “at the very least, kidnapping Harry will tell them we have the gamma laser. And it could make them suspicious of such little coincidences as the loss of Baldwin’s old terminal.”

“If he talks tomorrow, they will have knowledge instead of suspicion and this project will be aborted in a matter of minutes. We have just begun tapping this store of data on the world-wide operations of Thrush and scarcely a measurable fraction of a percent has been subjected to analysis; already three specific commercial operations as well as several public movements in California alone have been discovered to be directly operated

by local Satraps. Beyond a doubt, if we are allowed to continue Thrush will be rooted out and totally destroyed as a functioning entity before the end of the year. We can afford to lose the gamma laser, we can afford to lose individuals' lives if necessary — we can afford to lose a great deal, but we cannot afford to lose the security of this tap into the Ultimate Computer."

"Mave you considered that their suspicions of him might extend to their holding him as bait for a rescue attempt?"

"No. Without our terminal, we wouldn't have any idea what had happened to him. Thrush therefore would have left us a trail to follow. Also his Psychfile indicates they are more concerned with his mental condition than suspicious of it. The most recent entry, ten days ago, states that he is unusually disturbed and emotionally exhausted by the pressures of his job. It was on the basis of this report that he was placed under surveillance. Tomorrow he is scheduled for an intensive probing to find what is interfering with his efficiency."

"And Dr Grayson thinks they're likely to find it."

"Yas, "

Napoleon looked at Illya and Illya looked at Napoleon. "In that case I suppose we'd better get in there tonight and get him out," said Solo resignedly. "Okay, where are those blueprints?"

It didn't sound easy, and it wasn't going to be as easy as it sounded. Just knowing that the corridors around the medical detention area were filled with ultrasonics which made movement impossible didn't help to get through them, nor—was the knowledge of a CCTV camera which monitored all twenty-four doors in Harry's ward in a straight view down the hall particularly encouraging. Nevertheless, any security device can be bypassed, given the technology and the incentive. U.N.C.L.E. had both.

The difficult part was the ultrasonic. The alarm sensor was cheap and simple: it generated a modest number of decibels at forty or fifty kiloHertz and reacted to the echoes of everything within its area of coverage. Any change in the waveform, causable by the appearance, disappearance, or movement of anything which reflected or absorbed soundwaves at any place in range would upset the echo pattern and triager the alarm.

The detector unit was smaller than a table radio and cost about $50; its only countermeasure on the west coast strapped around the waist and fed a spiral cord to a light aluminum baton. Mr Simpson introduced Napoleon to the lights and switches above the handgrip.

“Don’t turn it on until you’re ready to use it — the batteries are good for six hours, but not under a steady drain. You’ll hear the ultrasonics before they can detect you, of course — or this neon pip will. That part you can Teave on all night: it has a penlight cell which should last most of a year.”

“That tells us when we’re coming close?” ~

“Yes. When the pip is glowing steadily, stop and set this switch to *Monitor*. This blue light will go on, probably for ten or fifteen seconds. When it goes out, you might want to wait another second or so before you put your full weight down, so to speak; then you move the switch back past *Test* to *Source* and these two pink lights will go on. Then you’re sonically invisible. When you have only half your time left on the batteries, one of them will go out. When you have ten minutes left, the other turns orange and starts to fade.”

“How does it work?”

“I was just coming to that part. During the first phase, it is analysing the wave patterns in the room; when you switch it over it duplicates them. As long. as you walk slowly, not over ten feet per second or so, and carry the wand with this knob above you like an umbrella, you’ll probably be pretty well protected.”

“Pretty well?”

“Well, under some circumstances it might not be adequate. If this green light goes on it means the unit isn’t quite matching. If that happens, stand absolutely still until it goes out. It’ll usually be three or four seconds. The air conditioning system moves a lot of warm air through this corridor, so the ultrasonic alarms are not set to their greatest sensitivity.”

“Of course,” said Illya. “Moving air could refract the waves and set off a false alarm. Now what do we do about the television camera? I see there is a relay box here in corridor four, the second sound-guarded one, but that’s five or six minutes away from Harry’s room and if a camera went out they’d have someone up to see about it within five minutes.”

“Yes,” said Mr Simpson. “But not in a minute and a half.”

“Probably not,” admitted Napoleon. “But how do we get from the a to the cell and back in under ten minutes? I did pretty well in track at college, but that was a few years ago, and I’m not sure my wind is up to the distance.”

“You don’t have to — at least not both of you. I’m sorry, I thought that was clear. You will go in together as far as Corridor Four, where you, Mr Kuryakin, will make yourself comfortable and prepare not to move for ten or fifteen minutes. You will wait with your hand inside the relay box; after an appropriate delay for Mr Solo to reach his position at the entrance to Mr Stevens’ ward, you can trip this induction jammer without moving anything but your hand, which will be concealed behind the panel. After ninety seconds you restore normal service. They won’t worry about it further until morning.”

“By which time it will be too late.”

“Hopefully.”

“And all I have to do is play Statues for fifteen minutes while Napoleon runs up and down the halls?”

“Walks.”

“Walks, then. What do I do if a guard comes by?”

“Not likely, since he couldn’t move in the sonic field any more than you could. At least you’ll be safe from guards,” said Napoleon. “You can meditate for a few minutes before and after you jigger the picture. I suppose I have to come back and pick him up afterwards?”

“Certainly,” said Mr Simpson. “He probably knows more than Harry Stevens.”

“I’d like to think so,” said Illya. “Is Harry going to be able to perambulate under his own power?”

“We sincerely hope he can. The odds are beyond us at this point. We haven’t been able to find out what he was shot with before he was put to bed, and there’s no way of telling.”

“We may have to carry Harry,” said Napoleon. “That’ll slow things down. How long was that picture to be cut?”

“Ninety seconds. Will you need two minutes? That’s quite a long time for dead air.”

“A point. How much does Harry weigh?”

“Ah... one-twenty.”

Napoleon shrugged, “Ninety seconds. Do I have a key to his room?”

“It’s a three-button combination. They don’t need more — a bolt and latch would restrain those patients who need it, and all comings and goings are monitored and taped automatically.”

“Except when the camera malfunctions,” said Illya.

“I believe the malfunction should be recorded as well,” said Mr Simpson. “All things considered, I think you should be glad it is as simple as this. Breaking into one of Thrush’s more securely protected areas was impossible before – now it’s merely difficult.”

“Difficult for you; for me is easy,” said Napoleon.

“Close de box,” said Illya. “Does that about cover things?”

“Pretty much. One more point: Mr Waverly asked me to tell you before you left. If you are caught, don’t be recognised.”

“We’ll work on it. Incidentally, considering the situation, why us?”

“Because you’re that much better than anyone else available. Remember that as a team your training, experience and record is simply superior to 98% of the U.N.C.L.E. field staff. Besides, no one else in the top ten percent is within call on such extremely short notice. Therefore you are not only the obvious but the solitary choice for the job. My congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

Their counterfeited magnecard opened an unmarked door in the blank side wall of an apartment house which faced on the next street uphill. Behind the door was a half-empty basement garage, deserted and silent. To their left, deeper into the hill, another closed door with an inconspicuous cards lot beside it was the only break in an otherwise featureless concrete wall.

It opened into a similarly bare corridor which ran fifty feet farther into the hill and then turned right to a third door, which surrendered to the same key and let them into a small? waiting room. A sign on the inside of this door said EXIT; the other door was open on their left.

“This looks like it,” said Napoleon. “Ready for Phase One?”

“Do you want a countdown just like in the movies?”

“Only if you start at two — we haven’t much time. Give me the gadget and let’s get it together.” He strapped the battery belt around his waist and plugged the baton into it. The three-position slide switch came naturally under his thumb as the orange detector pip flickered to unsteady life. “Bang on, That’s the way we have to go.”

He thrust the knobbed end of his wand out the door and the pip glowed like a fanned ember. He flipped the switch up and the blue jewel below the detector pip lit.

It seemed like a very long time before it went out and the unit declared itself ready to match’ anything. He flicked the switch down and locked it, and two pink jewels shone side by side.

“That should do it. Ready to go?”

Illya nodded.

“Okay. Bunch up now — this umbrella isn’t any too big.”

The silence of the corridors was eerie. Their feet shuffled noiselessly on the light carpet as they passed neatly numbered doors and turned twice according to memorized directions. Then they found and stopped at a locked steel wall panel almost tall enough to step through. Two doors, one above the other, painted the same restful color as the rest of the wall; the upper housed intercom junctions, the lower video.

The locked latch of the lower compartment, a standard industrial type, surrendered easily to a stock key. Illya sat crosslegged on the carpet beside it, studied the inside for a minute and said, “In about forty seconds it will be 3:42. You’re still satisfied with a seven-minute lead time and a ninety-second cutout?”

“Yeah.

“Okay. My zero is 0342. I’ll cut the picture at 0349 and it will stay cut until 0350:30. I’ll hope to see you back here by 0400.”

“Remember, I should have somebody with me. I may take a little longer coming back.”

“Just don’t make any extended stopovers. The first shift comes in at 5:30 and I’d hate to have to explain to Ward Baldwin why I was sitting in his basement with my finger on his camera cable.”

“I’d better get started. We’ve talked up my forty-second margin.

“Don’t be long.”

Illya sat with his left side against the wall and his head half inside the relay box. His right elbow rested on his knee and ‘his wristwatch, moved for the occasion to his unaccustomed wrist, was visible-with scarcely a shift of his eyes from the little box he held ready to be pressed against the fat grey video cable. He relaxed slightly and began to watch the minutes marching past.

Napoleon kept a measured stride to the end of the corridor and around the corner, down that hall beyond the range of the ultrasonic field to another door and into a stairwell. The door closed behind him as he stripped off the heavy belt and coiled it around the staff, then set the improvised caduceus in the corner behind the door. He wouldn’t need it until he came back this way...

He was at the proper corner with twenty seconds to spare, and his eye tracked the second hand across the last thin lines to the minute. Then with the faith of long friendship he moved as if the corridor would be safe two seconds after the mark. Counting in his head, he sprinted lightly to the eighth door on the right and punched 6-1-9 on the lock. It opened at once into a darkened cubicle. The blue-white swath of light fell across a bunk against the far wall. Sprawled across it, shirt and shoes off and sound asleep, was Harry.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to leave your toothbrush,” Napoleon murmured under his breath as he continued his mental count. *21 - 22 - 23 - 24...*

He hoisted Harry, still unconscious, more or less to his feet and braced him against the wall. *30 - 31 - 32 - whoops! - 34* ... Napoleon turned around and let Harry sag forward over his back, arms over his shoulders. Harry was breathing deeply and evenly. *Poor mutt*, Napoleon thought irrelevantly. *This is probably the best sleep he’s had in a while.* That cost him count — he glimpsed his watch while he crossed Harry’s wrists in front of him and shifted the weight onto his back. *48 - 49 - 50... Better get moving.*

His burden balanced like a side of beef, he staggered into the corridor again, hooking the door to with his toe and nearly losing his balance in the process. *64 - 65 - 66...* He made the end of the corridor and cleared the corner with about five seconds to spare, secure in the knowledge that Illya would be likely to give him a few seconds margin.

Once he was out of camera range he could slow down. The stairs were going to be a problem —

“HEY, FELLA, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? *Hold it right there!!*”

Napoleon started to turn, drawing his gun with his free hand, and felt something slam into his back like a sledgehammer as the SPLAT of a silenced Thrush rifle followed the sudden voice behind him. His own automatic coughed fatally once and silence rose from the carpet as the walls absorbed the echoes. The Thrush guard kicked a few seconds and was still.

Harry felt strangely limper than he had a minute before — Napoleon ducked and lifted the linked arms to check his passenger. He didn’t look... It suddenly became apparent to Napoleon that Harry’s troubles were, ultimately, finished.

So was their carefully prepared plan. Harry could no longer be induced to tell anyone anything, and there was an inconveniently dead Thrush unexpectedly involved as well. The situation called for some brilliant improvisation. He wished Illya were there.

Two deaths do not cancel each other, he said to himself, but two bodies may be easier to explain than one if we use them to explain each other. A pair of double doors opened off the corridor into a large dark office, and a quick search found and lit a desk lamp.

Now — how do we do it? Harry was shot while escaping, obviousky. And he killed the guard before he died. Uh-huh — with what? Well, he grabbed the guard’s pistol? You’re kidding. Got a better idea? He shook his head and started plotting the set-up.

Put the guard over by the door, maybe even with his body slumped against it; Harry about three feet away, the guard’s automatic in his hand. Say Harry had been hiding in here and the guard heard him, or —

There was a footstep outside and Napoleon’s hand darted to the lamp switch plunging the room into darkness just as the latch clicked and the door opened.

Light spilled in from the corridor, silhouetting a figure with a gun in her hand pointing steadily at him. He froze, squinting against the bright fluorescents. There almost seemed to be something familiar about the way she stood...

Slowly she lowered the gun.

“Napoleon?” said a soft, slightly hesitant voice.

Something impossible started to stir in his memory as she spoke; on sudden impulse he snapped the desk lamp back on. She came a step towards

him, tentatively.

“Have I changed so much?” she asked. “After eighteen years — don’t you recognize me?”

It was Joan.

His wife.

CHAPTER NINE
“Where Have You Been All My Life?”

The room spun about Napoleon, and a wave of dizziness blurred his vision for a moment. He leaned on the desk and tried ae think. The question of a hoax never entered his mind.

Joan.

The only photograph he had of her was a yellowed snapshot in the bottom of a box somewhere — he hadn’t seen it in years. But her image was still clear in that part of his mind where he lived alone; cool, intelligent eyes with a directness of gaze which had annoyed some of his classmates but had drawn him magnetically; a certain indefinable grace of posture and movement which even now identified her more surely to him even than her soft and husky voice.

He stared at her, unable to voice the questions bursting unformed within him. She looked down at the floor. “Good,” she said. “I thought you’d think of that.” She knelt smoothly to inspect Harry’s body, then rose again as effortlessly as a dancer. “Would you have noticed the guard’s pistol hasn’t been fired? Baldwin would.”

Napoleon became aware that his mouth was open, and closed it. Then he realized he’d been asked a question, and opened it again to answer. But he couldn’t think of anything to say. “Joan?” he finally said tentatively.

“I thought you might be a little surprised,” she said. “I’ll explain it all to you, but not right now. You want to get out of here, don’t you?”

“Uh — yes... Oh! The Luger!” He stood up and studied the scene again. And Harry. And Joan, who had been killed in a horrible accident back home while he was carrying an M-1 through enemy snow with death crouched behind every hill. He’d hardly known her, his bride of a year, with whom he’d lived less than a month — and nearly twenty years later, half his lifetime removed, he scarcely thought about her except as a private dream that had no relation to the real world...

While that part of his mind reeled in gibbering confusion, his trained intelligence took on the problem at hand. He worked the toggle and ejected one cartridge from the guard's Luger; Joan caught it and dropped it into her pocket. Then he fired one muffled round into the guard's body, directing the slug parallel to the angle of the first and fatal wound. This done, he fitted the Luger back into Harry's limp and cooling hand.

He straightened from his task, and Joan handed him the gleaming coppery cartridge. "At least it's the right caliber," she pointed out.

Napoleon scowled. "But it's a wadcutter," he pointed out. "Mine are full-jacketed hollowpoints. Tough. We can't do an autopsy to find the other slug and replace it without more trouble than we can spare at the moment. We have a chance it won't be found, at least for a couple of days, and it may be bashed up beyond ballistic reconstruction. Or they may not care to work on it. It looks like an open and shut case from here."

"Let's hope it does from upstairs. We'd better get out now, I think."

The plural registered belatedly, and Napoleon reacted.

Joan noticed, and looked at him. "Do you want me to come with you?"

He stared at her, and suddenly whole areas of memories untapped for years flashed before him. *Joan??* Finally he said, "I've changed."

She smiled. "So have I, Napoleon. Possibly more than you – or perhaps not. But I think you're the same in the important ways."

"Do — you want to come? You know who I am and what I do..."

"Of course. Everyone in Thrush does."

"Thrush?"

"Of course Thrush, you ninny! Where do you think you are? I was working for Thrush before you even heard of U.N.C.L.E. — from about the time they first heard of you."

"Oh! Uh, maybe you'd better explain after we get outside. Yes. If you come with me, I — I'd be honored. But..."

"Napoleon, before we go on I want to tell you one thing. I never pretended or lied about the way I felt about you. Everything else —"

"Not now. I'm not really sure you're real, but I don't want anything to happen to you before I find out. It's— it's been a long eighteen years. And a lot has happened."

Her smile warmed him again. "Yes, quite a lot. Where's your partner, Illya? I've wanted to meet him for years."

“He’s right upstairs... Oh ye gods! Illya!” He looked at his watch. It was nine minutes past four. “He’s sitting in the middle of an ultrasonic field upstairs, and I’m ten minutes late to get him out. Come on!”

With a last quick look around, they checked all the elements of their tableau, switched off the light, and departed. In silence, Napoleon led the way back to the proper stairwell and up two flights. There was his sonic shield, just as he’d left it. He cracked the door, and extended the baton.

In seconds, the circuitry was functioning, though only one pink light was on. Together within the invisible umbrella they moved slowly into the protected area. Napoleon was very aware of her presence, though she scarcely touched him.

The green warning signal, which had stayed dark through his inbound journey, came to life shortly after they entered the sonic field. Joan followed his lead instantly and froze until his hand cued her to move again. The light gleamed once more just before they reached the corner, and he drew her closer to him with his free arm until the warning light went out. Her arm came around his waist, and thus embracing, they rounded the corner.

And thus Illya first saw them. An expression compounded of relief, irritation, surprise and concern chased itself around his broad Slavic features as they approached.

“Napoleon,” he said softly, “that – isn’t Harry.”

“Joan, this is my partner, Illya Nicolaivitch Kuryakin. He sometimes overstates the obvious. Illya, I would like you to meet Joan, my wife. She’s defecting from Thrush. Would you care to come along, now that you’ve been properly introduced?”

It is to Illya’s eternal credit that he remembered to lock the access panel.

“So Mr Stevens is no longer with us,” said Alexander Waverly when Napoleon had finished his report.

“Neither is he with Thrush, sir,” Illya pointed out.

“Hm. Yes. And neither are you, young lady. Which brings me to the question of how you fit into this. I was aware of you only as a brief entry in Mr Solo’s personal history file, closed before our first contact with him.

You were dead, you know," he added chidingly. "How do you happen to spring up in such an unlikely place?"

"I was interviewing Harry last night just before the sedative took him off. He wasn't very happy. His section super sent him in because he'd had an attack of the shakes and started to cry a little in the office. Nobody could figure out why, and they were sort of worried."

"I can understand that."

"He was going to get a good long sleep and a nourishing breakfast and go in for a hypnoprobe at 11:00. I was sent in to talk to him as he was drifting off to see if I could pick up some idea as to where his problem lay."

"And did you?"

"Not exactly. But he was moaning a little before he went deeply asleep, and he mentioned U.N.C.L.E. twice. And he mentioned Solo. Was Harry connected with you?"

"You must have expected him to be rescued; did you know Mr Solo would be doing the rescuing?"

"I thought it likely."

"Why?"

"Why did you send him?"

Waverly coughed and fumbled for his pipe. "Mr Solo — with the best of intentions, you could be forgiven a less than objective viewpoint — but are you satisfied as to her authenticity and sincerity? Her fingerprints are being compared at the moment, but they are not likely to match anything on record."

Napoleon looked at her and held her eyes while a thousand thoughts flowed between them in a few seconds. "Yes sir," he said "I am. And I'd stake my life on her sincerity."

"You already did," Illya pointed out.

"I did not report what I heard from Harry," Joan said. "I filed only that he moaned and muttered before he went to sleep but that no recognizable words were formed. He didn't respond to me at all; he was already half-under when I came into his room. Whatever they gave him hit faster than usual."

Mr Waverly tamped his pipe reflectively with a nicotine-stained thumb and fumbled for a large wooden match. He waited for the sulphurous flare to die down before drawing clean flame into the tobacco-packed bowl. At

length it was properly ignited and he dropped the remaining quarter-inch of white wood into a convenient ashtray.

He exhaled a cloud of fragrant blue smoke that rose about his head and drifted toward the air-conditioner vent. “Mrs Solo,” he said as if considering the name, “You understand that your appearance here at this time is, frankly, unexpected. We have no pressing business for the next few hours — would you care to tell us the story of your life?”

“Well, the first sixteen years were ordinary enough. But then I was contacted by Thrush, and they offered me a lot of things I really wanted. I volunteered for something exciting, and they gave me a full battery of tests. Now I guess this was about the time you were starting to be interested in Napoleon. As I recall, you picked him out of the personality profiles sent to you for consideration by that student testing organization - what’s their name...”

“I didn’t know anything about U.N.C.L.E. before I got out of the service,” said Napoteon.

“But they knew about you. Didn’t they, Mr Waverly?”

Waverly cleared his throat. “Ah — please continue.”

“Certainly. That was in 1949. The following year —”

“I was a senior in high school in 1950,” said Napoleon.

“You were still a junior in the spring semester. Thrush noticed you too about that time, and it didn’t take them long to learn that U.N.C.L.E. was already interested in you. They ran your profile through the Ultimate Computer and it matched mine to you.”

“And that fall you came to Hudson High as a senior, even though you were a year younger.”

“And it took you three months to notice me.”

They laughed together, then stopped and studied each other searchingly, as though neither one was sure what they were looking for.

“And just a few months after that we graduated. I was just starting to find out what kind of man you really were when you went into the army.”

“I think I still have your letters — and that picture of you I...” his voice caught slightly, “... took on our honeymoon.”

“I never even had that much.” She took his hand, and they stared at each other wordlessly for several seconds. Mr Waverly and Illya stared at each other too, with rather different expressions.

“Twitterpated,” said the U.N.C.L.E. chief, and cleared his throat. “I beLieve Mr Solo had just left for military service.”

“We wrote a lot back and forth, sir,” Napoleon explained.

“I proposed to her when I finished my basic, conditional on my survival, and she accepted.”

“Now you were working for Thrush all this time?”

“Yes. My original assignment was to assess Napoleon for subversion to Thrush before U.N.C.L.E. actually got around to making their first contact with him.”

“Did your assignment include marrying him?” Illya asked.

“No. But — well, I had to talk my nest leader into vouching for my report that convinced them to allow me to marry him. I wanted to marry him.” She smiled. “The Ultimate Computer did a good job of match making.”

“Then what happened?”

“We were married. I was home on leave for a few weeks in the summer of ‘52, and we were married on August third.”

“And you shipped out again on the eighteenth, and I never saw you again until tonight. Or is it this morning?”

“I’m afraid the sun’s up already, Mr Waverly, we can quarter here under the circumstances, I should think.”

“I would like to hear the rest of her story, if she feels up to it?”

“Of course. That’s really most of it. Central wasn’t very happy about my marrying my subject, and they were, well, very difficult during those few months. And I finally had to tell them that you were very stubborn and single-minded, and would never work out as a double agent. They had already pretty well decided that from studying your charts, so they declared my assignment cancelled and pulled me out.”

“They staged the accident?”

She nodded. “I don’t know where they got the body, but I’m told there wasn’t much left of it. I was in Paterson, New Jersey, at the time, and I’ve never been closer than that since, except for once about six years ago when I flew past a hundred miles away. It was too overcast to see anything, but I thought about you for the next week.”

Napoleon took over the narration. “I was in the middle of Kanghwa when I got the message. It was supposed to have stopped at the armored

base but I got it about fifteen minutes before the attack. I didn't really think about it much — and I don't remember any of the battle very clearly, but that was when I won my silver star. Anyway, she was buried a month before I came home.

And a few weeks later, Captain Kowalski got in touch with me — he'd been my superior in Korea — and talked for about two hours about what I wanted to do with my life. At that point, I didn't know. I'd known pretty well what I'd wanted to do, but it all included Joan. And then she wasn't there anymore. Captain Kowalski told me a little bit about U.N.C.L.E. and said they'd asked him to come to me as a friend, and present their offer. They gave a wide choice of college curricula for which they would pay and offered me, in addition to a full scholarship with a little spare cash on the side, a guarantee of at least a year's trial employment at a good starting salary when I graduated. And an opportunity to do something really constructive with my life, which somehow seemed to matter a lot to me right then.

"Was there any more?" Mr Waverly asked Joan.

"Not really. I spent about six weeks being debriefed of everything I knew about Napoleon, and then they gave me a three month vacation all over South America. It didn't really help much. They didn't let me keep anything that would remind me of you, naturally. But they didn't have the memory blocks then, and I never let anyone know that I remembered everything about you — that I could never forget you.

"I didn't exactly pine away. I stayed busy one place and another." She hesitated. "I married another Thrush in 1957 — he was a chemical engineer. We were reasonably happy together, though of course there's no such thing as a quiet home life when you work for Thrush. We weren't in one place more than two years the whole time. He died almost three years ago — in an industrial accident. About six months ago, I was starting to go out of my mind in a routine job as a lab secretary in the psychogenic section, so I reapplied for active field status. My record looked good, I passed the physical, and training was a snap. I always kept in shape." She flexed herself and Napoleon grinned.

"I've been in San Francisco for more than a year. Baldwin knows all about my connection with you, and he knows you were supposed to mean nothing to me. But he told me when I started to work there that if you ever

came west of the Rocky Mountains again he would ship me to Madagascar until you were gone.

“He’s suspicious of the Computer, but he trusts its accuracy. And sometimes I think he can read minds. Because I’ve known for — well, at least two years that if I had the chance I’d come over to your side to be with you — if you’d have me.”

“Ah — I — well, I can’t tell yet. I mean, we’ve both changed a lot in eighteen years. I’ve been through a lot, and I don’t know how much I’ll be like what you remember.”

“Are you willing to try for a few weeks and see? After all, we’re like old friends reunited. We’ll have to find out if the old spark is still there.”

“It may be awhile before anything can be done about that,” Napoleon said. “We’re sort of in the middle of something very important, and I don’t know whether you can do much more than sit in a room and occaSionally be guided to the commissary for meals. You’ll have a tv and books and whatever else you want, but I don’t think you’ll be allowed to move around much.”

“If you’ll come and see me once a day, I’ll be happy.”

Ilya stared at his oblivious partner. Alexander Waverly drummed his knobbly fingers restlessly on the black leather tabletop.

Ward Baldwin sat at a rolltop desk and scowled at the autopsy report on the two corpses found downstairs this morning. Stevens had been shot full of their finest Mickey Finn and the post-mortem had shown a sufficient amount still in his bloodstream to have kept him in solid slumber for another five hours. Yet by all the evidence dutifully recorded on the scene and reported to him, this man had somehow jimmied his door — which was not impossible to a sober, alert man with sufficient ability — gotten out and down the corridor during an unexplained malfunction which had blanked that particular camera at that particular moment, and had the strength and stamina to overcome and disarm a guard after having been shot in the back. Or perhaps the guard, with two bullets in him, had finally gotten his rifle aimed, and released the fatal shot.

But Stevens should have been incapable of consciousness, let alone coherent thought, let alone this intense and coordinated display of physical activity. Even granting his miraculous immunity to whatever was used on him, the coincidence of the television monitor malfunction was just too much to take.

He flipped a toggle beside his speaking horn. “Robin, would you order printouts of Harry Steven’s medical reports from last night? And find out who followed him down when they put him to sleep. Then request a polygraph operator to my office for two this afternoon. I will have a team of medical technicians to interview.”

“Certainly, sir. Will you want me to postpone Mr Shimbu’s appointment? He can be very unpleasant about waiting.”

“Ask him to come at one. The support of the Black Panthers in this city is invaluable, though they are sometimes less than cooperative. If it weren’t for the progress of construction on the TransAmerica Building, I’d wait and do it myself.”

“You have a Pascual Lopez Sanchez scheduled for two-thirty.

“Put him off until tomorrow. I loath the thought of him, and he won’t go back to Barcelona without seeing me. Why they sent this butcher to pollute my satrapy...”

“Two o’clock Friday?”

“I suppose. Full security, of course. He’s a treacherous dog.”

“Mr Stevens’s final pre-narcosis interview was conducted by Joan Perry; she reported no understandable verbalizations.”

“Is there a tape of the noises made?”

“No.”

“Call Miss Perry. Perhaps she can reproduce some of his mumbles. I’d like to know as much as possible about Mr Steven’s last few hours on earth.”

“She checked out. Emergency leave. Her mother broke her hip. She had nine days coming. Should I still call her?”

“Local?”

“Iowa City.”

“Never mind. She’s competent: if she said he was unintelligible, then he was. A pity he wasn’t a higher priority case. I may call her later. We’ll see what ballistics says, after all, before I leap to the unwarranted

conclusion that U.N.C.L.E. has been sneaking into my top secret areas in the small hours — a disquieting thought, to say the least."

Baldwin's disquietude faded as he passed on to other reports, but concern over the grotesque charade in his basement occupied half his mind.

CHAPTER TEN
“You’d Better Humor Him”

Illya was left to his own devices for the next few days. Mr Waverly had politely declined Joan’s offer of information, rather to her surprise, but she and Napoleon found many things to talk about privately. The sunroof of the U.N.C.L.E. office was now barred to them because its view of the hills and the bay worked both ways, and anyone with a good telescope could have identified them from any of a dozen public prominences; nevertheless, while the electronic synapses of the Ultimate Computer were being quietly unravelled and copied, they were all three under effective house arrest. Joan’s green triangle badge allowed her escorted access to lower security areas, and Napoleon spent a lot of time being her escort.

The flow of data from UlComp’s vast storage was increasing as more paths were opened, and the Terminal Gang unofficially expected they would soon find some indication of the geographic positions of all three Central Units; when these were located, specific action could be taken to strike at all three ganglia simultaneously. Napoleon and Illya had been promised an active part in this final resolution of Thrush, but until that promise flowered, they had only rooms and corridors to pace and walls to stare at.

At least, Illya had. Napoleon and Joan stared at each other far more than seemed necessary — in the commissary, in the entertainment room, in the gym, in the target range, in the library. Illya spent a lot of time downstairs watching people sorting reports, typing precis, reading gibberish off small CRT screens and typing gibberish back to them. After two days he was starting to talk to himself, so he began picking up reports and contributing his own analyses, which were filed and mostly ignored.

His personal clearance allowed him to scan anything that looked interesting, and he satisfied much curiosity. Only the highest-priority programs, the decision-making, planning and strategic programs which gave the whole system a sort of meta-intelligence of its own, were kept in areas simply not available to any remote terminal. These key programs could be accessed only through Central’s own home console. The system had been inaugurated less than two years ago, apparently after one

particularly brilliant Satrap had used his terminal to copy many top secret programs, having solved the access proceedure as an intellectual exercise, and made off with the copies temporarily during a power struggle which had shaken the whole Hierarchy. Now Satrap terminals simply would not access that part of the bank.

The day-to-day business of Thrush was laid out before them in vast and intricate variety almost beyond comprehension, from the private telephone number of the London Satrap and biographical data on his staff of 470 to the accounts of a two-man bicycle shop in Hobart, Tasmania, which had been continu- ally subsidised for 19 years with only one call to duty.

Mysteries were being solved daily.

The Russian heavy cargo plane (AN-22-09303) which disappeared last month ff southern Greenland while carrying earthquake disaster relief to Peru was hijacked by Thrush. The AN-22 was the largest (100-ton) cargo plane until superseded by the American C-5A; the Russtan fleet now consists of nineteen, #09303 was believed to be carrying an eleven-ton heltcopter and 40 prefab houses, plus several tons of medical equipment and supplies.

...Infrasonic weapon in 7 Hz range mounted in heavy truck, powered by jet turbine. Lavavasour insulation for operators; possible one-man verston. Fatal to all life over radius of one-half to one mile, moderate structural damage within 75 to 100 yards. Construction cost: $150,000. Cost per use: $200 - $300. Minimal technology level three, given power source. Code name: Earthquake Whistle. Design spectfications classified White-Plus.

At the lunch break Illya asked Mr Gold, “Have you gotten into the white-classified material yet?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Yesterday — no, two days ago. It hasn’t been too hard to break their internal security systems; UlComp designed them, and now it’s solving them for me. All I have to do is ask it properly.”

“Do you know anything about what they called ‘The Earthquake Whistle’?”

Mr Gold shuddered. “Thrush hasn’t built one yet, but you ran into a pilot model a couple of years ago in New York. It was a low-power job, on a higher frequency with a shorter wavelength tuned to resonate your building. I heard it did pretty well.”

“It was most impressive. Napoleon blew it up with a 75mm armor-piercing shell.”

“Well, the 7-cycle note over fifty or a hundred decibels starts to break down living tissues. Human, animal, insect, plant. It’ll kill a tree in ten minutes at sufficient intensity, and a man in seconds. And it doesn’t give any sign or warning, unless you have something handy that will detect a 7 Hz tone. You just feel dizzy and fall over. The French were doing some scary things with infrasonics a few years ago; apparently Thrush has picked up on it. Mr Simpson has a ten-minute lecture on the subject which would make it all clear to you — how the thing that generates it works, and what it can and can’t do. All the Earthquake Whistle is, structurally, is a big whistle mounted on a truck. The inside of the truck is shielded — the French researchers also developed an insulation against subsonics, light and simple, which was a good trick since ten feet of concrete is transparent and a forty-foot sandback negligible — and the whistle is blown by a jet turbine, which burns cheap kerosene.”

“And ‘*technology Level three*’?”

“I’m told it means more or less that it would help if you could weld the metal, but it isn’t absolutely necessary. It could be built in a backyard by a couple of guys who were handy with tools. More than 90% of the estimated cost is a medium-big truck-and-trailer rig about the size of a small moving van, and the jet turbine which goes inside it. The rest of it would go for sheet metal and tubing. I think Thrush had a price tag on it —”

“One hundred and fifty thousand dollars,” said Illya.

“Uh-huh. That included labor.”

“Considering it would kill as many people as a small atomic bomb, without destroying valuable real estate, and could be used over and over for two or three hundred dollars a shot, I’m surprised it hasn’t been developed already.”

“Well, there’s always the problem with infrasonics that you cannot try something out on a small scale. Sound waves have to be a certain size, and whatever generates them has to be big enough. Why do you think you get such lousy sound out of a transistor radio? Transistors are clean and give fantastic response, but besides the cheap circuits you have a two-inch speaker — you can’t expect it to generate a twenty-foot wavelength. And a 7 Hz wave is about 155 feet long. So nobody has quite had the nerve to

build the Earthquake Whistle. I don't know whether they're afraid it won't work and they'll be laughed at, or afraid it will work and they'll be assassinated."

"So what else is new? Anything outstanding in the last six hours?"

"I think we're getting close to the Central locations and scheduling records. I can smell 'em. But nothing specific yet. I think it's in the section we're starting into — maybe the next couple of days. Let's see, what else? Did you hear there is probably a major hard base somewhere? Some evidence it's used for top secret research and training — things like that.

"Don't know how big it is, or whether it's tied directly into the communications net or where it stands in the Hierarchy."

Illya prodded his sauerkraut with a reluctant fork. "Any mention in the local bank of Joan's disappearance?"

"She's listed on leave, with a request for her to see Baldwin as soon as she checks in. Nothing suspicious at all. Except that two agents have been sent here from Central on some top secret mission and report only to Baldwin. I'm surprised Mr Waverly hasn't contacted you about that yet."

"He wouldn't if that was all he knew. Any idea what they're here for?"

"Not a thought. Baldwin didn't send for them, and nothing has been mentioned to or through Ul Comp about them. Maybe it's something personal."

"Two agents from Central? Who?"

"I don't remember. You can see the report copy if you'd like."

"I would. Whoever it is, I don't think they can be up to any good. We may be able to get some idea of what they're here for from who they are. Remember, this is the age of specialisation."

About the same time, less than two miles away, Ward Baldwin sat in a worn leather swivel chair and looked at a few typed sheets and several large photographs as though he found them personally repugnant.

The photographs were clinically sharp and gruesomely detailed, but received less attention than the underscored sentences which had brought the report to him.

“Second wound made no sooner than five minutes after death. The wound burst heart, instantly fatal. Slug split against posterior rib, recovered. (See still #6.) Second slug trajectory closely parallel first, but fired after blood had pooled and tonus lost. Indications body was reclining on right side as second wound inflicted. Second-slug recovered, undamaged. (See still #7.)”

Ballistics: “Slug B matches test slug from Guard Ellern’s sidearm. (See Comparison Frame #1.) Slug A damaged beyond comparison, but not standard Thrush sidearm issue; reconstruction yields a full-jacketed slug, exact original configuration undetermined. (See Frame #2.)”

Baldwin knew perfectly well what the report did not feel was quite proven. The microphotograph of the second slug told his practiced eye the unidentified slug had come from an U.N.C.L.E. Special; its base bore the distinctive scratches left by the threading inside the muzzle.

His musings were interrupted at this point by the gentle chime of his intercom and Robin’s voice announcing visitors. “The two men from Central are here,” she said. “Were you expecting them?”

“Wasn’t that some obscure communications problem?” he asked.

There was a pause, followed by a strong, friendly voice working a little too close to the mike. “Ah, Dr Baldwin, you were told to expect us. It’s simply a matter of explaining a technical problem and getting your official permission to work on it... Surely you can spare us eight minutes.”

“Young man, would you return the intercom to my secretary? I will take great relish in underwriting, your report, should you survive to complete one.”

A distant shriek came through the intercom, and the voice spoke sharply, off-mike. “Fang, put her down! *Fang!*”

Something between a snarl and a grunt answered him, followed by Robin’s voice, breathless but nearly composed. “I’m all right, sir. Really. Shall I send —”

The office door opened and two men strode in. The second closed it quietly behind them.

“...them in...” she finished lamely.

“Yes, thank you, Robin. You might also send for a security force and have them ready at the door.”

“Good afternoon, Doctor,” said the front man, in the same sturdy tones which had come through the intercom. “Allow me to introduce myself and my partner.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Baldwin. “You’re Gryptytte-Thynne and he’s Count Fred Moriarty.”

The second individual, a large mound of what might have been muscle but was probably fat, stepped forward and bowed silently.

“Not even close,” said the first. “I’m Vince Kerrigan and this pitiful wreck is my partner, Chou Tee Fang. He’s Formosan, of course. Now what we have to do here need never bother you again. It’s just a technical sort of thing, running around with instruments and checking a few circuits and talking to a few people. We’ve done this before, and we guarantee not to get in anybody’s way. Now if you’ll just initial this, I will vanish out of your life as swiftly as I came into —”

“What sort of technical?”

“Surely Central explained it to you.”

“They served me a helping of doubletalk about imbalanced impedances and unaccounted line losses. Before I give you permission to prowl my territory I want to know just what is going on.”

“Simply, Doctor, that there seems to be an open circuit somewhere in the San Francisco Relay Area.” Chou’s nasal bass joined the conversation. “The probability was determined by demand analysis and checked by Central through UlComp as far as could be accomplished remotely. My partner and I are here to inquire more closely into the matter.” His voice was deep for a Chinese, and slightly pompous.

“In all likelihood it’s no more than a faulty piece of equipment,” said Kerrigan. “Didn’t you just receive a new master terminal?”

“Yes — and I must thank someone at Central for the special cabinet in which it was constructed. It goes quite as well with my office as the old one did.”

“Well, I hope you won’t have to lose it. The transmission anomalies first appeared about a week after the change-over, and there might be a stuck relay or something like that. It’s as if you didn’t hang up the telephone.”

“No, Vince,” said Fang. “Then you couldn’t receive any incoming calls. In this case it doesn’t seem to interfere with the full functioning of the

terminal unit."

"Sure, Fang, but what I meant was that it's as if he had an open line all the time."

"Of course. I only meant that your analogy was poorly chosen. You have no grasp of these technical things. You must forgive my partner, Dr Baldwin. All he ever has on his mind –"

"Gentlemen," said Ward Baldwin harshly. "You broke in here to tell me about a telephone problem?"

"Well, it's more than just a –"

"You invited us in, and —"

"How long do you expect to take finding it?"

"Oh, the checking routine takes about a week, but we might find it the first day."

"On the other hand, it might not be routine," said Fang.

"I see. You gentlemen are experienced field agents, are you not?" Baldwin asked sweetly.

"Our record speaks for itself," said Kerrigan with a bit of a swagger.

"I was afraid it might," said Baldwin. "Nevertheless, I have an interesting and possibly challenging intellectual problem at the moment, and I was wondering if you might be able to help me with it. It involves a recent double murder under very suspicious circumstances, with the distinct likelihood that U.N.C.L.E. may have been involved. I suspect there may have been a plot to extract information from the very heart of Thrush, using a subverted agent. That agent may now be dead."

He studied them from the corner of his eye as he sorted absently through some papers on his desk. "Have you heard of the KugelBlitzGewehr — or Plasmoid Projector? My Satrapy has been testing the pilot model for the last three months. In the course of a general investigation surrounding the emotional breakdown and subsequent mysterious death of this suspected agent we discovered that one key device, fortunately a spare, is missing. I strongly suspect that U.N.C.L.E. has it. I have evidence that United Network Commandos attempted to rescue Harry Stevens, but were surprised in the attempt. I should give a great deal to know how our other security systems were avoided. The guard who stumbled across them apparently fired once and hit Stevens, while the agent carrying him had time to return his fire fatally. Then he set up this little

tableau.” Baldwin indicated the photographs of the murder scene, and sighed. “All these modern stylists,” he said. “It looks good from a distance, but under any intellectual scrutiny it falls to pieces.”

“You think an U.N.C.L.E. agent killed a guard in your own restricted area?”

“I doubt it was Zodiac,” said Baldwin sarcastically.

“An U.N.C.L.E. infiltration, and a good one,” said Kerrigan, obviously interested.

“Infiltration, attempted kidnapping and double murder,” said Baldwin.

“And not a bad job on the first two, I must admit. For amateurs.

“What about the KBG?” asked Chou. “You think this Stevens passed something of it to U.N.C.L.E.?”

“I think he stole a spare unit from the aiming mechanism, which is a key sub-assembly. U.N.C.L.E. could just as well have broken in here to pick it up; we don’t know Stevens took it. But he was not suspected of more than incipient nervous collapse, he could easily have carried the missing device on his person. We may never know how he was induced to betray us. His loyalty had been unquestioned. His profiles, his whole record was exemplary. Whatever force they used caused such emotional conflicts his mind apparently began to crack.

I would like to know just what was the hold they had on him. Their meddling has cost me a valuable worker — I’m told — and an annoying security leak. Regrettably, my bailiwick has a shortage of such highly trained men as yourselves, or I should already have directed steps of retaliation against the United Network Command. My work here is largely of a theoretical nature — pure research, if you understand me. My staff is more suited for the battles of the laboratory than the conflicts of the streets, and against the Network’s trained killers we would be hopelessly outmatched.”

“But not weaponless,” Chou pointed out. “I believe your prototype KBG is operational. Has it been tested under combat conditions?”

“Hey,” said Vince. “That sounds like fun. How much dope do you have on U.N.C.L.E.’s local defenses?”

“Quite enough,” said Baldwin. “I do not lack for plans — only for men capable of carrying them out. I have permission to employ the KBG at my

discretion, and inasmuch as U.N.C.L.E. already knows about it, I thought we might arrange to give them a practical demonstration."

"What can it do best? We'll want to use it to best advantage."

"You may have time to familiarize yourselves with it. But I want this punitive raid undertaken before the week is out."

"Would Thursday night be convenient?"

"Perfectly. Such a blow must be neither too hastily struck nor too long delayed. Pull up chairs, gentlemen, and I will show you an attack plan for your consideration..."

CHAPTER ELEVEN
“Absolutely Fascinating!”

Of course Baldwin checked with Central for permission to use their two men and the KBG, and inevitably Alexander Waverly knew that permission had been granted about thirty seconds before Baldwin knew. Thus, when the final attack plans were confirmed and set in motion, recording units in U.N.C.L.E.’s San Francisco office copied down every step, and every calculation leading to that step. The defenders had begun preparations and rehearsals before the full assault force had been picked.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were appraised of the impending attack twenty-six hours before T-zero, As usual, they received summons to Mr Waverly’s home-from-home, his field office, for “a briefing,” subject unspecified.

“Gentlemen,” he began without preamble as they draped themselves appropriately over convenient pieces of furniture, “tomorrow night we will be invaded by Thrush, hopefully with the KBG-in full operation.”

“Hopefully?” said Ilya.

“We know exactly when and where they will strike, as well as how hard and towards what goal. We also know what they want, where they expect to find it — and most important, how hard they are willing to fight to attain it. We shall therefore give it to them with a convincing minimum of resistance, including simulated casualties on our side and real ones on theirs. Neither of you will participate in the sham defense — the risk of your being recognised is too great.

“Nevertheless, I believe I can promise you an opportunity to stretch your atrophying muscles very soon. Less than an hour ago the locations of Thrush Central were identified, and we may be ready to move against them in forty-eight hours. You will be fully briefed after tomorrow night’s action, but basically the situation is this: the Central complex which currently has control is located in Darjeeling — a ticklish spot, with Nepal and Pakistan, China, Bhutan and India clustered around the borders of Sikkim with missiles bristling and hostility heavy; any sort of overt military activity in the area could start World War III in a matter of hours. I would prefer to

wait another few weeks until control is shifted to the present stand-by Central, which is in an ideal site for our purposes, but Thrush is already aware of some kind of communications anomaly in this relay-area, and has sent a team here to trace it. We cannot hope to remain undiscovered another week. We must act at once."

"Where *is* the back-up unit?" asked Illya.

"Are we going to Darjeeling?" asked Napoleon.

"No," said Mr Waverly, "You're going to San Diego. The stand-by Central is set up in one of the exposition buildings in Balboa Park there.'

"And the third unit?"

"In six DC-3s in Central Africa. They are the most vulnerable, and we should be able to immobilize them with little effort.

"But we'll go into all this in your briefing Friday. Tonight's operation demands most of our attention at the moment, Baldwin believes we stole the gamma laser the night Mr Stevens was killed, and is anxious to recover it before we can finish analyzing it. I'm afraid, Mr Solo, that your improvisation... didn't hold up against even a relatively superficial autopsy."

"I think we did pretty well, under the circumstances," said Napoleon.

Mr Waverly commenced stuffing a pipe. "Be that as it may," he said,"they will be allowed to find the gamma laser in the second of six places they have been instructed to look for it — in the High-Energy Lab, next tothe mass spectrometer. A work-order with it will indicate that it has not yet been subjected to more than a superficial examination. Considering how long it took us to borrow the X-ray crystallography from Stanford, Section Eight is doing an excellent job — they expect to finish within twelve hours. Microphotogrammetry was completed the day after you brought the laser rod to us. If we offer Thrush a convincing resistance before allowing them to recapture it, they may retire convinced of an effective victory."

"When are they due to arrive?"

"Fifteen minutes of midnight tomorrow, through a fire exit on the second level."

At twenty minutes before midnight, though everything seemed perfectly normal in U.N.C.L.E. HQ San Francisco, a subtle atmosphere of tension seeped through the silent corridors. During the afternoon, Mr Simpson had mounted two thermographs in protective housings, several sealed photographic plates and a recording magnetometer inconspicuously around the second-level fire exit which would shortly open to admit the not-unwelcome invaders. A Fastax WF-4 high speed instrumentation camera was mounted behind a ceiling fixture; it would be started by a burst of magnetic flux or heat striking the other sensors, and its 400 feet of XR film would last approximately fifteen seconds at 1000 frames/second. Samples of various materials were placed along the projected invasion route, arranged to blend with the rather spartan decor.

His personal portable observation post was centered around an optical thermograph which was too large to carry and too expensive to abandon, mounted on a rubber-tired waist-high lab cart which had heen designed to bear an obsolete oscilloscope. His final preparations completed by 9:00 o'clock, he retired to a private office for an hour's nap.

Now as the moment of attack approached, the normally deserted corridors of the second level were quiet. Access doors leading to other areas had been secured, as had the main elevator bank. Guards were at their posts, nylon body armor under their suits, palms sweating slightly.

Mr Simpson loaded and checked his motorized Nikon and its 250-shot magazine; as long as he held down its button it would shoot five pictures a second. He set the shutter to 1/1000th with the lens wide open at f/1.8, two stops underexposed for the 85 ambient foot-candles of the corridor, and took his position as ordered behind the first corner with instructions to fall back when the Thrush force advanced.

Napoleon paced his small quarters Bridlessiys watched by Joan, who was not to be told what was happening but asked repeatedly if he was edgy. Illya was downstairs locked in his room, also as ordered, drumming his finger-tips and fretting quietly. Considering the building's structure, he wasn't even likely to hear anything of the battle but what came over the intercom monitor considerately left open for him.

Mr Waverly would be directing operations from the central communications room, where banks of TV screens showed him the corridors of the second level and a microphone stood before him to transmit

ordersto all his units, Now the command channel was silent, and cameras stared down empty corridors as the last minutes ticked away...

On level two Mr Simpson slipped into a heavy asbestos lab smock, with matching boots and hood, Under the exigencies of field observation of an unwilling and even uncooperative subject, certain discomforts were to be expected. He Switched on his Jab cart, directing current from the heavy batteries on the lower shelf to the recording optical thermograph and the magnetometer beside it. Five minutes remained as he took his position around the corner of a. crossing corridor some thirty yards from the fire exit. According to his Accutron it was T-minus-one when a flare of light around the fire door and a muffled *WHAFF!* pushed a wave of hot air down the passage.

Instantly one hand dropped to the start-button on his datacorder and the other brought up the Nikon. Quickly, before the 15-second load of the Fastax ran out, he stuck the Nikon vertically around the corner, centering its right-angle viewfinder on the converging lines of the corridor and the action already starting towards him through the molten ruins of a once-sturdy door.

He held the button five seconds, long enough to record in color as much of two more fireballs as the relatively limited range of his emulsion could handle. He could synchronise these frames with the ultrahighspeed 16mm XR footage, perforce in monochrome, to study the development of the plasmoid.

Recorder needles leaped wildly as the drive motor hummed and tape flew past polished heads, while above ceiling lights flashed and alarm bells hammered through the halls. Guards burst forth from appropriate directions after a reasonable delay; by that time the attack force was two-thirds of the way to the corner and advancing rapidly. Mr Simpson retired unseen down the hall they would follow, wheeling his equipment cart ahead of him at a dog-trot.

Gunfire spat behind him as he ducked behind the steel partition which backed the Section Receptionist’s deserted desk. He paused here as U.N.C.L.E. guards rushed past him in both directions, then a fusillade of slugs slapped the wall and suddenly the corridor was empty again. Behind him and his steel shield, two members of the Home Team popped out, released a few rounds and popped back again.

Mr Simpson barely had time to blink as the leap of a magnetometer needle gave him a fraction of a second warning and a sphere of unspeakably intense light shot past a few feet away and burst with a quiet padded concussion ten yards behind him. He felt a wash of warmth reflecting from the wall he hugged and a surge of gratitude for the asbestos smock.

They were definitely coming this way. As if to remind him, a voice spoke tinnily from the open communicator in his pocket. "*Simpson! Simpson! Fall back to post three! Fall back!*"

Now for the first time since his glimpse at their entrance, he got a direct look at the fantastic weapon wielded by Thrush. It was probably the same unit he'd seen in the film: its fat, ribbed barrel blossomed like a flower into a two-foot translucent wire-laced dish with a slender bright pistil tapering six inches to its focus at a needle point. Flux in the dish could spin the plasma as it emerged from the nozzle until the mass of super-heated Ionised gas was released in a whirling fireball. His Nikon fired *ba-ba-ba-ba-bap* as he stuck his head around the corner to aim and look for himself; as the hiss and crackle began again he ducked back, but held the camera out with one gloved hand until the magnetometer needle slammed against its stop pin.

He jerked back almost simultaneously with another flare, this time from the opposite side of his partition, which suddenly grew uncomfortably warm about waist level as a large patch of paint bubbled and stank. Boots clattered towards him over the sound of the KBG preparing another thunderbolt, until a shouted order stopped them and a two-foot circle in the middle of his sheltering wall smoked briefly as the blistered paint charred and evaporated, then turned cherry red and began to slag.

By that time Mr Simpson was racing down the corridor, heavy smock flapping behind him, rubber-tired cart slewing slightly on the waxed floor. The Nikon lay atop the bank of batteries, lens cracked and fused, paint burned from its face except for a clean patch where an asbestos glove had protected it. There were vague shouts behind him and another fireball burst ten yards short, throwing his blue silhouette before him on the wall beside the opening elevator. Enamel softened and bubbled on the exposed corners of the lab cart, and the rear tires stuck stringily to the floor a moment until he lifted it like a wheelbarrow and flung it ahead of him towards the padded rear wall of the waiting car, diving after it as the doors began to close and

the last guard, who had stayed to hold the car for him, fired two shots between the shuttering sheets of steel as the KBG warmed up for another blast. The doors met a second before it came. They shuddered and smelt, but the elevator had already started up, and its occupants sighed with shared relief.

“Get everything?” asked the guard.

“Very nearly,” said Mr Simpson.

“How was it?”

His eyes gleamed with delight as he rose from a cursory check of his gear. “Fascinating. “Absolutely fascinating.”

CHAPTER TWELVE
“It’s A Nice Little Plan”

“Tomorrow afternoon,” said Mr Waverly, “at 3:00 o’clock Pacific Daylight Time, Thrush, as a coherent international entity, will effectively cease to exist. In an operation of devilish subtlety, requiring a minimum of force and a maximum of surprise, as well as split-second co-ordination, not one, nor two, but all three Thrush Centrals should fall into our hands. The attack plans you will be using should be infallible: it was entirely prepared by the Ultimate Computer.”

“Are you sure you can trust it?” Napoleon asked.

“Implicitly. I’m afraid you and Mr Kuryakin may find your part of the job frustratingly simple — there will be no frontal atack, just a few minutes skulking in a public park on a Saturday afternoon.”

“It seems too simple,” said Illya.

“We have no reason to doubt Thrush’s own top secret security files on the matter. Mr Simpson has modified or manufactured — I myself am uncertain how — an Alpha variant of the Paralane knockout gas you have been using for the last year.”

“What does it do – besides put them to sleep in two seconds?”

“Like the dog in the night-time, of primary importance is what it does not do: in this case it does not stimulate the ventilation monitor used in the Balboa Park enclave. The intake ducts will be your target.”

He tapped his pipe on the side of an ashtray as Napoleon said, “You mean we just put them to sleep and walk in?”

“Exactly. Mr Gold will go with you, and will check the proper reception of a full emergency dump from the other side of the world. Because simultaneously with your secural of the stand-by unit in San Diego, at 4:30 Sunday morning in Darjeeling, the second largest special assault force in the history of the United Network Command will move in quietly and surround the Bengali Opium Processing Plant, vacant for the last five years under the new regime, but an ideal location for Thrush Central.

“The local government has been informed at the very highest levels and without being told just what will be going on they have been persuaded to withhold official reaction for up to half an hour, but with agent Castora in command nothing should be allowed to disturb the natives. A few shots exchanged, nothing more. Thrush expects to be able to lose one Central unit without serious inconvenience — hence this fantastic electromagnetic will-o’-the-wisp they have created. But you, Mr Solo, Mr Kuryakin, will have captured their back-up system and effectively defeated them a moment before they became vulnerable.

“The final unit is broken down for transportation in six DC-3’s in Central Africa. It was bound for Lisbon, but our field agent Philip Lebow single-handedly sabotaged the aircraft, thus immobilising the third and last operational unit.”

“That sounds like a checkmate,” said Illya.

“Indeed. But there is increasing evidence that our opponent has one Major piece yet unexposed. A hard base of some magnitude, isolated and concealed somewhere in the world — where they probably have an equivalent master computer unit, if not direct communication with or control of the rest of the Hierarchy. Inasmuch as we have found no less than four references in appropriate contexts to *‘Thrush Island’* on the comm tapes we have monitored so far, we recognise the fact that it may or may not be an island; Thrush is perfectly capable of assigning that designation to a post in the Gobi Desert or the Matto Grosso.”

“But the UlComp doesn’t know — or won’t tell — where it is?”

“We aren’t sure yet. It may be a slang term of some unguessable content. When we have Central’s own banks to work through, we expect to find the answers to these and many other questions.”

“Ah, excuse me,” said Napoleon doubtfully, “but did I understand you to say that we would stage our sneaky raid on Central at three o’clock in the afternoon?”

“Yes. The situation in Darjeeling is much more sensitive than in San Diego, and the hour of four-thirty in the morning is ideal for the kind of operation Mr Castora feels is appropriate. At the same time, the middle of a hot Saturday afternoon will find Balboa Park filled with innocent by-standers, among whom our operativeS should be comparatively

inconspicuous. Some female workers from the Los Angeles office will be assigned to accompany you as assistants and general cover."

"It looks so simple," said Illya, tracing the plans with a forefinger.

"I jumper these wires, while Napoleon plants the gas cannisters here, we wait two minutes, and walk in."

"It's a fine plan," said Mr Waverly. "The Ultimate Computer worked it out for us at the request of Mr Gold, who set it up as a test of the strategic planning program."

"I thought you couldn't get at their top security programs," said Napoleon. "I thought that was why we were doing all this."

"We can't get at them. But we can use them. Remember, the program is the master form or blueprint of everything that is to be done with the given data and from which the decision is reached. We can put data into one side of the black box and get results out the other, but we want to know what goes on inside the box. And it can't be examined through a terminal, Only Central Staff is allowed to get inside. Therefore..."

"Therefore we have to take over Central. Did UlComp also set up the Darjeeling Operation?"

"Not in detail. While there is no objection to testing the security of a standby site, oddly enough, the Acting Central at any given moment is not an acceptable subject for defense analysis. A touch of paranoia, if not enough to protect them. Still, we know just how much effort will be needed; the order of priority is headed by transfer of control, followed by flight, defense or surrender. We want them to dump, then surrender.

"And this will destroy Thrush?"

"This will destroy its central nervous system. The 14,872 individual Satrapys will be abandoned to their fates and initiative of their leaders. We have adequate evidence of most of the criminal activities of Thrush, hopefully sufficient to bring specific indictments against most of the Satraps and some of their staffs; it will be presented to whatever authorities have jurisdiction.

"There are some known Thrush operations which show no criminal taint, and it is not a crime to belong to Thrush — merely highly questionable. We can only watch their future activities with the controlling mind behind them gone.

“There will be no lack of work for us in the next few years, gentlemen — every surviving Satrap will see himself the Man of the Hour, inspired to weld the shattered segments into a new whole with himself at the head. This will inevitably lead to differences of opinion, and likely gang guerilla warfare in a few thousand locations, as well as independent operations on somewhat smaller scales than before.”

“But without Central, all intercommunication and co-ordination among them will be gone,” said Napoleon, awed.

“Not *all*,” said Illya. “They can still use public telephone circuits and amateur radio. But it won’t quite have that old — what’s the word, Meyer?”

“Zip.”

“Thank you. Zip.”

“Of course, we will have the advantage of knowing where everyone is, what they have, can do and have done, which will be of inestimable advantage.”

“We knew all that about Baldwin and it never helped,” said Napoleon.

“By the way,” asked Illya, “have you been able to place anything against Baldwin? Indictments? Evidence?”

“Ah... Am. I confidently expect to bring some kind of charges against him, though at present I’m afraid I can’t tell what. After all, we have sifted barely three percent of the data that’s been fed us so far.”

“I put a flag on Baldwin’s name,” said Napoleon, “If anything comes through with him on it I get a copy. He’s done a lot of research for them, all laboratory stuff with legally obtained materials (as far as we can tell) and unspecified results; they pay him a lot of royalties for unspecified uses of his patents; he socializes with many of their top brass. He walks like a Thrush, he has feathers like a Thrush, he chirps like a Thrush and he runs around a lot with Thrush —”

“Besides,” said Illya, “he told us he was Thrush. And why should he lie?”

“But we cannot connect him in any way with any illegal activity.”

“Yet,” said Mr Waverly.

The August afternoon sun shone hot on irrigated trees and rococo concrete buildings, on bushes, baseball diamond and bandshell. The wheezing music of a carrousel wafted on the warm breeze; kids ran and shouted, or stretched on tiptoe to reach a waterfountain. There was a scent of carmelcorn and of flowers, with an occasional whiff from the zoo just over the hill.

Among a variety of motley groups wandering down the long empty street between shuttered and padlocked exhibition buildings strolled three assorted couples, carrying, respectively, a large briefcase, a large camera bag, and a large leather purse. Most of the members of this unnoticed group wore dark glasses, and two of the men wore caps with bills which shaded their faces perhaps a little more than necessary.

The boarded windows and untracked portico of the chipped plaster facade they passed bespoke seasons without tenants. Behind those blank walls waited a staff of 47 and several millions of dollars worth of hardware, protected by one of the best portable security systems in the world. They waited, ready to be called to duty in a couple of weeks or on sixty seconds notice, but not quite ready to be subject to an attack themselves, feeling as secure as they had almost every right to feel.

Napoleon Solo could have known the name, rank and personal history of every one of the 47, had he cared to memorize that list - he did know the entrance code, the Block diagram of the air-conditioning system, the master-alarm net and cross-check plan, and where the washrooms were.

Since Joan was still restricted in San Francisco, Napoleon was accompanied by Linda Brunelle, a healthy blonde from the Los Angeles office; Illya had been assigned a lean brunette named Terri Travener. Mr Gold had brought Miss Klingstein with him, as well as a satchel stuffed with data sheets which held the keys to the Ultimate Computer itself, scrawled in illegible pencil. Between them they expected to be able to operate at least as much of the hardware as necessary.

Illya carried a stenographer’s gadget bag, containing his electronic sensors, assorted cables, and two candy bars. Brandy slung a leather tote bag which held three cannisters of Paralane-Alpha.

“It struck me,” said Napoleon as they wandered with the citizenry through the park past their target, “that one of our problems in dealing with Thrush was that they always took the initiative, and they knew how to apply

that minimum of force in just the right place before you knew it and be finished before you could quite react. And it occurred to me –”

“... that we were doing the same thing to them only more so and first?” said Illya. “I’m sorry, Napoleon. If I’d thought you’d missed that, I would have pointed it out to you days ago.”

“You didn’t know days ago,” said Napoleon reasonably. “Smart-alec Russian. I’ll bet you didn’t think of it until just now.”

“I’m insulted.”

“Good. Anyway, I just thought I’d mention the point. Isn’t this our corner?”

Gold and Miss Klingstein stopped to admire the view west towards the bay while Napoleon and Illya, with their aides, walked idly around the end of the building onto a gravel path. They found a wood-and-stucco utility locker on the back wall behind a clump of eucalyptus; Illya’s key fit the padlock and a quick look verified a network of wires, all tagged with numbers. Then as he consulted a list and Terri commenced unpacking the kit, Napoleon worked his way along the wall, Brandy behind him, feet crunching quietly on the fragrant leaves.

There was his air intake, louvered and screened, eight feet above the ground. He could just barely reach it, he found, and it would be simple to hang the cannisters to the screen. He left Brandy there arming the gas cylinders, and padded back to Illya.

“How are we doing?” he asked.

“As well as can reasonably be expected,” said his partner. “My jumpers are ready to cut in and we have about four minutes to go.”

“About? Have you checked with Darjeeling?”

“I was just about to. Would you?”

Napoleon’s communicator was assembled in his hand, and he asked, “Open Channel S, please.”

A guarded voice answered interrogatively, and Napoleon said, “It’s us. We seem to have about three and a half minutes to zero. How’s by you?”

“Much the same. Is all well where you are?”

“So far. We’ll launch the first phase exactly one minute before the hour.”

“The hour? Oh, sorry. We’re in a half-hour difference zone. It’s just coming up on 0:27.”

“Okay, that matches our 14:57. Coming up on the minute — four, three, two, one, mark!”

“Two seconds error; not enough to worry about. Five seconds would be close enough provided you went first, I will initiate my phase then, fifteen seconds after you release your gas.”

“Make it thirty seconds,” said Illya. “It’ll take the gas most of a minute to move through the system into their quarters. That gives your target a minute or so to notice you’re coming and push the panic button, so the dump should come just about the time everyone here is dozing off.”

“Check,” said Castora. “Standing by.”

“Two minutes,” said Illya as Napoleon returned to where Brandy had prepared and armed all three charges.

With thirty seconds to go he started all three timers and stretched to hang the cylinders, one at a time, on the grating over the mouth of the air intake. Then he looked up at them expectantly as the final seconds ticked away. They burst with a rush, and Illya dropped the microswitches of his jumper unit. Faintly through his communicator he heard the cry of “Go!” from ten thousand miles away. The warm California breeze rustled in undisturbed tranquility as three cannisters poured pale vapor into the drawing vent.

“Well,” said Illya after a few seconds, “that should do it.”

It did.

SECTION IV : “*Oh, What A Fall Was There!*”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
“We’ve Just Been Destroyed”

Breakfast was quieter than usual in the tall old house on Alamo Square that Sunday. Ward Baldwin finished his oatmeal, his eggs and his kippers without a word, addressed a knifeload of marmalade to his toast and sipped his Earl Grey tea before speaking. His voice was harsh and level.

“In view of the continued silence from Central, which has now lasted nearly twenty four hours, I fear we have no choice but to assume that the Hierarchy has become, at least temporarily, leaderless at the very highest level.”

“What can have happened?” Irene pondered.

“I’m sure Alexander Waverly would know,” Robin volunteered. “In fact, I’ll bet if I called U.N.C.L.E. and asked him, he’d even tell me. D’you think I should?”

“I dare say he’d relish the opportunity to tell me it was his doing. It may be a matter of a month — perhaps as much as three months — before Central can be replaced and restaffed, and changes made in security systems. That electronic box in my study sits there with one sheet hanging out of its printer: ‘*Due to circumstances beyond our control, all communication with Central and UlComp has been interrupted. Please stand by. This unit wtll be reactivated as soon as possible.*’ Not very encouraging.” He cleared his throat and sipped his tea.

“It may mean that the floating electronic crap-game will take a few days to assemble itself somewhere and resume operations on the old frequency, but in such a case The Island should be able to keep all their balls in the air during the interim. From here it is impossible to tell to what extent the top levels of the Hierarchy may have been damaged. I may call Victor after midnight by transatlantic telephone — I’m sure he still has his scrambler from that dreadful Guardian business in ’61 and the old Krivan key should be as good as it ever was.

“What do you suppose The Island is doing?” Robin asked. “You could check through Vince and Fang.”

“The Men From Central took their leave quite late last night,” Irene said. “When I went into the library to announce breakfast, I found the sofa neatly made up and everything put away as though they’d never been here.”

“I was still up when they left, my dear. They were in rather a hurry, apparently having received an urgent summons from The Island, but they paused to invite me to join them in the incipient action. They gave me the impression it was being fortified to be held as a last redoubt in hope of evading U.N.C.L.E.’s all-probing eyes — the picture they sketched reminded me strongly of Remington’s study of The Fall Of The Alamo. Lacking the dedication of Colonel Bowie and the stamina of Congressman Crockett, I quoted my Selective Service classification of 7-J: to be mobilised only in case of an actual enemy invasion, and assembled in Union Square to pile sandbags around Huntley and Brinkley.

“You’ll have to change that one, dear,” said Irene. “Huntley has retired.”

“What? At his age? This younger generation is soft. I’ve said it again and again.”

“You don’t suppose poor Mr Stevens might have had something to do with all this,” Robin asked.

“I can’t see how. One day I may ask Waverly about it. He must know — no natural disaster could have been so devastating.”

“Well, we aren’t in any trouble with U.N.C.L.E., are we?”

“Of course not, dear,” said Irene. “Not legally. Though I suppose they can’t help but be suspicious of us. Besides, if they knocked over Central, any evidence they had seized in the course of an illegal entry would be inadmissible in court.”

“Then all we have to do is sit still and wait for them to get a new Central running. After all, it’s not as if Ward’s whole livelihood depended on Thrush.”

“Essentially my own conclusion,” said Baldwin. “We may have to suspend portions of our operation and curtail some of the more expensive projects, and I shall be crippled without a computer — let us consider leasing a local service. Life itself should go on much as usual. Probably

quieter.” He sighed and finished his cup of tea. “Ah well, back to pure research.”

That afternoon, a few miles away in downtown San Francisco, Joan was officially told all. Her clearance was granted in conjunction with Mr Waverly’s briefing of Napoleon and Illya on the earliest results of their successful capture of Thrush Central and the Ultimate Computer. She listened open-mouthed as the magnitude of the coup was gradually revealed to her.

“According to Mr Gold, the emergency dump transmission from Darjeeling went perfectly. The Master Catalog Index has already been copied out and everything seemed to check as they began analysis. There are, by the way, a number of valuable programs we expect to adapt to our own system.”

“And you did all this through Baldwin’s old terminal?” Joan asked incredulously.

“Well, that was the keyhole we opened, and once we had a janitor inside to tap the wine-kegs, we were able to put a whole army through the keyhole and take over.” Illya choked and Joan laughed caval, “You haven’t changed all that much.”

“Well, okay. It was a lot more abstract and theoretical than that. But Illya explained it all to me as we went along.”

The intercom flashed and buzzed, and was answered. “Simpson here. I thought you’d like to know — we’ve just been destroyed. An outside source seems to have activated the terminal’s remote destruct circuit.”

“I’m gratified we came through it so well,” said Mr Waverly. “When did this disaster occur?”

“About a minute ago. Before the terminal was brought in here, all the autodestruct devices had been neutralised. I thought we should know if anybody tried to set them off, so I traced that particular circuit and connected it to an alarm.”

“An alarm?”

“Just a buzzer and a large red light saying BOOM. I wanted to be sure and notice if it went off.”

“Baldwin?”

“No, the remote destruct command can only be janavated by the Ultimate Computer. You can imagine the chaos that could result if any terminal could blow up any other terminal.”

“I see what you mean,” said Napoleon.

“You also mean Thrush Island has a fully programmed stand-by unit running things,” Illya realised.

“*Capable* of running things,” said Mr Simpson. “Or possibly with only a few transmission channels, so it couldn’t really handle the whole huge network all at once.”

“If they have copies of the operating executive programs and data banks, which they should,” Waverly mused, “and adequate hardware, which they must, they might be able to recover their losses yet. Is there any way of telling how long it will take to find Thrush Island?”

“The data files we’re sorting now will take at least another week to reduce and cross-check. We’ll analyse the flight programs, all of which are coded, and find how far it is from two or three different airports.”

“No, you can’t,” said Joan unexpectedly. “It’s only served from Tokyo. I don’t know where it is, but I was told that by everybody there.”

“You were there?”

“I spent about eight months on what must have been Thrush Island, from what you’ve said about it, though I don’t think it was ever referred to as anything but ‘here.’ ”

“How recently?”

“About four years ago.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. We left Tokyo in a sealed private jet and went back the same way.”

Mr Waverly tapped his knobbly fingers on the black leather desktop and studied Joan from under bushy white eyebrows. “Mrs —ah— Solo,” he cleared his throat. “What else can you tell us about this place? How long did it take you from Tokyo?”

“Quite a while. It was about two in the morning when we took off, and there was quite a liquor stock on board. The crew never came out of the cabin, and it was daylight when we were escorted from the plane to our quarters. And I remember I looked at my watch and said something

properly horrified about it being eight o'clock already. And the maid said no, it was only seven, and I should reset my watch and go to bed because Orientation Tea was at four o'clock that afternoon."

"Very good," said Waverly. "Do you remember what kind of jet?"

"A twin — custom interior like a club car. Oh, one of the other men on board was trying to impress everybody, said his Satrapy had one just like it; cruised at 500 miles per hour."

"Capital," said Mr Waverly.

"Three thousand miles from Japan, and fifteen degrees west," said Illya, who'd worked it out by eye on the huge polar projection wall map. "Was it warm or cold?"

"Oh, warm! I went swimming almost every day while I was there. I got the most beautiful tan — you should have seen me."

Joan and Napoleon exchanged sappy looks as Illya continued. "Three thousand miles south puts it within five or ten degrees of the equator around 320° East Longitude."

"I don't suppose you noticed the sun's elevation much while you were there," said Mr Simpson's voice unexpectedly.

"I'm afraid not. It did get pretty much directly overhead at noon.

"And it got pretty hot. I burned badly my first week there, but after that I was all right. I remember the lagoon side faced east, if that's any help."

"It could be." Mr Waverly addressed the intercom. "Mr Simpson, contact NASA for a full set of mapping photographs, maximum size, covering the area from 5° South latitude, between 110° and 125° East longitude, omitting major land areas like Borneo, of course."

Mr Simpson recited the figures back and rang off as Waverly said, "Mrs —ah— Solo, you may have been of immense help to us. Every speck of land in that area has been photographed from space in recent years, and one of those pictures may strike you as familiar."

He touched another intercom button. "Miss Hoffman, would you ask the correlation section downstairs to abandon analysis of flight-plan data in favor of a scan for anything we may know about small islands around the Equator near 120° East." He turned in his chair and squinted up at the wall map. "It would appear to be somewhere in Central Indonesia: the Molacca Sea, the Celebes, the Banda Sea, the Ceram Sea — we have observers in

that area. Check with the Djakarta office. See if they've heard anything unusual about an island."

"First Kashmair, now Indonesia..." Illya mused. "Thrush seems to like the security afforded them with an insecure and touchy host."

"Nevertheless, even if it means massive paramilitary action against a fortified base, they must be found and rooted out before we can count this Hydra-headed bird moribund."

"Unless we could convince them logically to surrender," Napoleon said.

"Or asked them politely."

"We'll have to start with some sort of infiltration to hit power and communications," said Illya, "as soon as we know where we're going."

"Napoleon," Joan asked, "are you likely to lead the infiltration force?"

"I'd expect to," said Solo, glancing at his chief.

"I don't know anything about offshore contours or outer defenses, but I can tell you a lot about the island you can't get from satellite photos, like what's in which building, and what goes on where. They might have moved one or two of the test shacks, or put up a new quonset in the last couple of years, but the main buildings looked as if they'd been there quite a while. I could probably draw you a rough map — not really detailed, but I think I remember the layout pretty well."

Illya pushed a blank manila folder with a nylon-tipped pen clipped to it across the table towards her, and she began.

First she sketched an emaciated crescent moon, remarking, "It's about two hundred miles from end to end around the Tagoon beach and maybe two hundred yards across at the widest. Maybe less."

She placed a hundred-yard square, according to her scale, on the inner side of the island, about the middle. "That's the Big House. Maybe not that big," she added, and corrected the sketch messily. "But pretty big. There's a dock right in front of it, and I believe a submarine pen opens into the lagoon. Then along here are three narrow buildings side by side — they're big enough to fly a small plane into. I don't know what's in them, probably shops; nothing to do with my job. On this side is the staff housing — it's as old as the Big House, at least a hundred years, and so are the long buildings. And one other: it looks like a big stone and mortar barn. It's back behind and to the side from the Big House, almost touching at this corner. I think

that’s where the generators are.” She added the described structures to her map as she spoke.

“Guard housing is here and here, sort of bracketing the center of the island. I think there’s a Guard staff at the Big House, too — there’s a total garrison of at least three or four hundred. Then this big open space is the combat test area, launch site, landing strip, parade ground and soccer field; past it is a big blockhouse and a couple of test shacks way out on that point. I know this end better because I always went out there to go swimming. There’s a nasty undertow along the southern tip, and no sand at all. I usually had to wear sneakers when I went in because of the coral, but the water was about eighty degrees the whole time we were there. I didn’t have much to do — mostly some psych testing, and one or two routine jobs assisting at a drug-therapy interview — so I had lots of time to myself.

“Anyway, in the other direction, past Staff Housing, there’s ten or twelve — probably fifteen by now — lab huts. They’re all painted different colors. Light green was Psych, yellow was Chem, blue was Human Factors. I think red was High Energy Physics, and I remember black was something terrible. Nobody told me, and questions are rude when everybody is under some kind of security restrictions. If you need to know, you’ll be told — that sort of thing. I don’t remember what the rest of them were. Beyond them was another test area — I think it was materiel and equipment exposure tests. Some of the larger lab. animals were penned out there, too; they needed room to run around in and stay healthy. The big transmitter was past the zoo, and there’s a test shack with a big dish antenna on top right at the tip. I think it’s focussed on a synchronous satellite. How’s that?”

“Satisfactory,” said Mr Waverly, studying her work carefully.

“Good. I want to go along.”

“I’m afraid —”

“That’s my price for all this information. I spent two years as a field Thrush; I’ve stayed in training. I also know your target better than anyone else available.”

“You must understand your recent — ah — change of heart seems comparatively sudden...”

“It wasn’t so much a change of *heart*,” she said, exchanging another sappy smile with Napoleon. “Thrush just prevented me from finding where it really was all those years.”

“How fortunate,” said Illya, “that you found out just before Thrush was effectively annihilated.”

Napoleon nodded. “Luck,” he said, “runs in our family.”

The requested satellite photographs arrived Tuesday morning and went with xeroxes of a cleaned-up version of Joan’s sketch map to teams of photo-interpretation experts. By lunchtime Wednesday nothing had turned up.

After lunch a pair of pages arrived on Mr Waverly’s desk, a staple through their corner. A complex file code filled the top line and was translated by the second, third, fourth and fifth lines which identified the paper as selections from the monthly summary filed 23 July, through Djakarta — specifically the text of a report from an U.N.C.L.E.-supported marine research station in Makasar. Mr Waverly scanned the next twenty lines and his hand reached out to the call button before he turned the page.

Illya, Napoleon and Joan assembled within two and a half minutes to be met with a precis of the report. One of several dolphins who came in regularly for conversational practice and a game of checkers had mentioned passing an atoll far to the south (location uncertain but apparently within a hundred kilometers of the Lesser Sunda Archipelago) which was ringed with small floating things, made of metal and plastic, spaced every kilometer or so around the atoll at about a sixty kilometer radius. They were apparently connected by wire to the island, and made no sound at all. according to the dolphin, who had been asked to go back and find out more. He seemed curious about it; he’d mentioned the subject hoping Dr Kaja, the marine biologist who operated the research station and who had filed the report, could tell him what they were. He’d asked a couple other dolphins he’d met on the way back; they’d noticed the things and supposed they were listening devices, but they didn’t particularly care.

“The island would have to be between seven and eight degrees south,” said Illya, studying the wall map and tilting his head to read the angled lettering.

“Listening devices?” said Joan.

“Sonar and radar and other detection systems mostly emit loud signals which tell the whole world somebody’s there,” Napoleon explained. “The same reason to use photomultipliers to see in the dark instead of an infrared searchlight.”

“And floating like that they can listen in the air and underwater,” Illya added. “They will be very difficult to sneak up on.”

“While you’re on your way up here,” Mr Waverly said, “I filed a revised request with NASA specifying high-resolution mapping shots of the appropriate quadrangle. This request is being processed at the moment. Apparently, Mrs — ah — Solo, that twin-jet had a somewhat higher cruising speed than your travelling companion knew.”

“Oh, I learned long ago never to trust anything a Thrush tells me. *Told* me,” she corrected herself.

The deskside telephone chimed and Waverly answered it. “Yes? Ah. Very good... Oh. Oh? Have you compared —” His eyebrows knitted as he bent full attention on the telephone and his audience sat silent and staring. “I see. Yes, that is in itself informative. Can we arrange to have that particular set of co-ordinates photographed again as soon as possible? I see. Yes, by all means use my name if necessary to get it done. Thank you.”

He hung up and drummed his fingers for a moment. “One frame is missing from the series, replaced by a re-coded duplicate of another frame of vacant sea. Apparently that one negative has been tampered with in the master files.”

He cleared his throat and looked sharply at Joan. “Are you still as anxious to rush into the jaws of death?”

“Absolutely,” said Joan, gripping Napoleon’s hand and smiling up at him. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“You think the missing negative is proof enough, then?” said Illya.

“I believe its absence is most eloquent, Mr Kuryakin. We will not rush into action before spying out the terrain, but we might do well to transfer our central operation, quietly, to Makasar pending an interview with Dr Kaja and his trained fish. Mr Solo, what do you feel about taking your wife on such a business trip?”

“Frankly, sir, I wouldn’t want to leave her behind. I think I’d be afraid something would happen to her before I got back. Even under the circumstances, I’d feel better if she was with me.”

Waverly nodded. “Very well. Her knowledge of the terrain will be useful, especially if we are unable to get that satellite picture. It will require re-positioning one over the Gulf of Tonkin, and may take some time.” He fumbled his pipe and rolled leather pouch out of a side pocket and dipped a pungent bowlful which he tamped with stained thumb and forefinger. “I presume you can be ready to leave for Indonesia tomorrow evening. The sooner we get there, the sooner we will be acclimatized. This week we can spare three days — next week we will need all our faculties at optimum pitch.”

“Next week?”

“Thrush Island knows we’ve been tapping the Ultimate Computer — the remote destruct command directed at our illicit terminal demonstrates that. Beyond a doubt they are racing to replace their lost hardware and renew the offensive. If I knew absolutely that this unnamed island was the Thrush base we seek, I would order an attack on it at once. But pending verification by a NASA photograph — or positive identification by a qualified dolphin — I plan to be ready to move against them.”

“Next week?”

“I confidently expect so.”

“Then,” said Illya, “Southward, Ho!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
“Who’s Fluent In Dolphin?”

An U.N.C.L.E. jet carried them from Djakarta to the small field at Makasar in just under two hours. From 40,000 feet the ocean was a featureless cloud-streaked sheet in shades of greens and blues varying with the depth except where odd-shaped lumps of greenish-black broke the surface, jungle-tipped peaks rising from the vast sunken plain beneath the shallow Java Sea. At last they saw ahead a jagged spine of mountains jutting from the sea, mist-shrouded and kar; a bony peninsula springing from a body of land which was only a shadow on the edge of the world to their left and fading towards the horizon to their right. Before the sea on the far side had vanished behind the mountains, they started their long descent towards a city which lay at the foot of a lush valley on the near coast.

Fifteen minutes later the door swung down and became a short set of steps leading to a red-cinder paved airstrip and stifling heat. Napoleon’s light summer suit, comparatively comfortable in a New York heat wave, seemed suddenly bulkier and oppressive as he ducked slightly through the hatch and the interior air-conditioning vanished behind him.

A two-storey tower and a row of white buildings made up the airport facility. In the main waiting room, next to customs, they were greeted tentatively by a young woman in pink.

“U N.C.L.E.?” she said as they entered.

“Yes,” said Mr Waverly.

“My name is Merah Diambu — I’m Dr Kaja’s assistant. Ladju came in this morning and they’ve been working over charts all day. He’s just full of information. He’s been back to the island, and he’s checked with several locals apparently.”

“Fascinating. Does he talk to strangers?”

“He’s never had the opportunity, but I shouldn’t doubt it. Come on, I have a car outside. Unless you’re waiting for luggage?”

“No,” said Napoleon. “That’s coming separately, since we don’t know how long we’ll be staying. Do you really talk to fish?”

“Of course not. No cold-blooded animal has intelligence capable of speech. Dolphins are as mammalian as people — and possibly more intelligent. We couldn’t learn to talk to them, but some of them are learning to talk to us. You must be Napoleon Solo.”

They exchanged information on the short drive south to a small group of buildings around the foot of a short low pier facing the declining sun, and Merah recited the names correctly to Dr Larry Kaja, who squatted beside a wide shallow pool in which eight lazily moving feet of sleek power reclined on a bed of dark sand near a two-way hydrophone. Dr Kaja was young, square-faced, bearded and tanned.

“Can he hear us?” asked Joan.

“Probably. Can you hear them?” Dr Kaja addressed his microphone.

“*Clear azz a behl, Larry,*” said a speaker on the ground beside him, and the dolphin rolled lazily on his side and raised a casual flipper in greeting. “*Ow’zzzat?*”

“You’ve got the initial L pretty good, but you lost the first one right after the plosive.”

“*Yah, I know.*”

With a quick twist he lifted half his gleaming length out of the pool along with a cascade of water and leaned over the edge peering near-sightedly up at his visitors, swinging his head to scan them intently.

Napoleon gaped in amazement and turned to Illya. “That’s really him?”

“Uh-huh,” said Illya. “How about that?”

“Can he hear us?”

“Not well out of the water,” said Dr Kaja.

Ladju opened his glistening snout like a duck’s beak and emitted a staccato series of high-pitched quacks before writhing back into the pool, displacing another slosh of warm seawater.

“*Open mouthh mean surprizze, yah?*”

“Right, Ladju. These are the men who are curious about that island you found.”

“*Curreeosity izz a ffuhn zzing. But zzey’re noht ahll mehn. Hey, you wahnna play taggg?*”

“Me?” said Joan. “I — uh —”

“Now just a minute, buster,” said Napoleon. “That’s my wife you’re talking to.”

The speaker erupted in a sputtering cackle as Ladju flipped back and forth in the pool, rolling over and over.

Larry flipped a switch on the small waterproof amplifier at his feet and the sound cut off. “He scored on you, Mr Solo,” he explained. “He’s laughing at the moment.”

Joan asked hesitantly, “Ah — did I misinterpret the tone of his...”

Larry suppressed a smile. “I’m afraid not. I have no idea how serious he was, but your reaction was reasonably appropriate. Don’t worry — Ladju has a weird sense of humor, but he’s tremendously honorable — all the dolphins I’ve ever known are. Even if he is a little strange, even by their standards; Kanta, his girlfriend for a while, said so. Partly it’s his more human characteristics, she said.”

“I see,” said I1lya, whose smile had not been suppressed since his partner was looking elsewhere. “But about those charts.—”

A brass bell began clanging insistently on a post beside the pool as Ladju jerked the dangling rope with his teeth until Larry switched on the hydrophone again.

“*Sohrry abou’ zzat,*” said the speaker. “*You ghoing to the islan’?*”

“If it’s the island we’re looking for,” said Mr Waverly. “What can you tell me about it? Do you know where it is?”

“*I cou’ take you zzere, bu’ I cou’n’t ttehll you whehre itt izz.*”

“I have that problem on Long Island sometimes,” said Napoleon.

“Actually, we have it pretty well located,” said Larry. “The last chart we went over — the one showing sincline shifts and minor currents in that area — checked with the bottom contour map you read this morning. And tell them what you saw there.”

“*Hlotsss of misstakss on tchartsss.*”

“What did you see at the island?”

“*Hydrophonezz ahll aroun’. I wehn’ up c’ose an’ tchecked i’ toutt. Zzere’zz a neht across zhe reef ’assage, bu’ I ssmelled zzubmarinezz inzide.*

An’ I came up to zhe beatch an’ zzaw hlotss of houzzezz. Zzome bhig onezz.”

“There are no established military bases in that area,” said Mr Waverly. “Where is this island, exactly?”

“It’s called Fapa Tui,” said Larry, “and it’s at 122°48’ East and 7°31’ South. What exactly do you expect to find on this island, anyway? Somebody’s secret laboratory or the headquarters of a subversive international organisation?”

“All that and more,” said Mr Waverly. “I presume you heard that Thrush had been destroyed?”

“Yah,” said Larry. “I didn’t believe it.”

“You were right. Only most of Thrush has been destroyed. Fapa Tui may be their major hard base, and if it is left in operation they could restore their entire network within three months.”

“I see. What do you plan to do?”

“Invade,” said Mr Waverly succinctly.

“Far out! How soon?”

“As soon as a satellite photograph verifies that this island is indeed our target, a force of five hundred men under my command will go ashore and secure that island.”

“Just like that?”

“We sincerly hope so, Dr Kaja. It will not be as simple as it sounds, but two weeks should see the end of Thrush — as we know it — with the help of our handsome and intelligent friend Ladju.”

The object of this flattery twisted with delight and chirped like a soprano duck. “*You Misster Hwaver’y — you p’ay tchehkerzz?*”

“Checkers? Heh — as a matter of fact I used to be considered rather good at the game.” Waverly’s jowls corrugated as an amazed smile stretched his leathery features. “Would you care for a game?”

“*Sshure. I can bea’ Larry.*”

“Two out of three,” said Dr Kaja. “But I’m improving with practice.”

Ladju’s sputtering cackle sounded again and he rolled over onto his back, kicking delightedly amid sheets of water, as Napoleon and Illya stared speechless at him and their commander-in-chief.

Alexander Waverly's communicator chirped discreetly shortly before mid-night. He awakened instantly and slipped a hand under his pillow to answer it.

"Waverly here."

"Good morning, sir," said Miss Cramer's voice, "I thought you should know at once that the NASA photograph of the island you specified checks against the map — the buildings are all in the right places, except for three extra quonset huts. I've also had Section Four prepare a preliminary report on it, and they are working on a detailed study which may include a hydrographic report from soundings made in 1886; Thrush has owned the island since 1904. Would you like to hear the preliminary report or shall I send you a hardcopy?"

"Fax it to Djakarta. They can ship it on the jet which will bring the rest of our equipment here. What did you find out about submarine forces available? Did Tadashi Miruko agree?"

"He offered two hundred fifty troops, but his sub fleet is in Manila, thirteen hundred nautical miles from Thrush Island; I took the liberty of calling the naval base at Darwin, which is only about seven hundred. Under the circumstances they were willing to give us four landing subs and two hundred men. With an U.N.C.L.E. Battalion Command Module, you'll have almost five hundred troops."

"That's not too many. Have you arranged to fly Miruko's army to Darwin? And have you heard from Mike Hoar?"

"Colonel Hoar requires two weeks notice, but as a personal favor he's offered seventy experienced troops if you'll cover their transportation and the usual *per diem*. How soon will you want to strike? I haven't tied anything to a schedule, pending your decision."

"I will want to strike as soon as all the troops can be brought to bear. How long will that take?"

"Forces can be joined in Darwin within thirty-six hours, and the subs will take three days to Uffa.'

"To where? We're attacking Fapa Tui."

"I beg your pardon? At 122°48' by 7°31'? Just a moment... Apparently the Indonesian government gave it a native name in '62. It was Dutch in the earliest records — used as a major transfer point in the slave trade between 1830 and 1865. It was called Uffa then. An English group was there for a

few years before it was abandoned in 1887, and Thrush apparently set up there about twenty years later. All this is covered in that preliminary report, along with a blow-up from the recon photo."

"Hm. I see."

"The new construction on the island had been tentatively identified by Military Intelligence as a top-secret Indonesian military installation, but they didn't have anything definite, and the Indonesian government denied it. They have refused to participate in this operation, by the way, but the U.N. Security Council convinced them not to interfere as long as you don't carry the battle off the island or bring any forces near the mainland."

"Satisfactory. I see no reason to delay — mobilise at once. Effect armaments and security preparations according to the memorandum I left you. Put all this in motion in my name, and call me back in ten hours."

In the next few days, mighty forces shifted silently, focussing on an obscure, almost forgotten speck of land lost in the southern ocean, while Illya, Napoleon and Joan cleaned their guns and did roadwork along the wide dark beach at low tide, alternately running a mile and jogging a mile each way every afternoon. Mr Waverly reclined beneath a wide sunshade shared with Ladju, Dr Kaja kibitzing, across a four-foot checkerboard, just awash at the edge of the pool. Evenings were spent over maps and charts of Thrush Island or working out in an improvised gym. Terse conferences were held over a jury-rigged radio link through Djakarta to Ambon with the commanders of the attack forces; coded co-ordinate systems pinpointed locations on their copies of the charts. The full plan of attack was worked out during these final days.

A heavy cargo jet, unable to land at the small Makasar field, parachuted the Squid II minisub into the ocean half a mile offshore from Dr Kaja's lab on Thursday afternoon. Ladju gave Napoleon and Illya a tandem ride out to where it bobbed low in the water, and exhibited tremendous curiosity about the sub, especially its finless propulsion and steering system. More than twice the size of Mr Simpson's first model, which they had employed in a similar but smaller operation against an insular Thrush base, it was nearly identical in design: a fat grey teardrop with a ring of Coanda

jets pointing out at right angles to its longitudinal axis just ahead of the bulge. Silent, invisible to sonar while in motion, capable of forty-five knots submerged, it would carry the four of them to rendezvous with the main assault force, covering the three hundred miles in under eight hours with no effective limit on functioning depth; the ocean was not deep enough to crush the pressure hull. Ladju was impressed by its speed and range, having often swum circles around conventional submarines; he discussed it with Napoleon and Illya as they checked it out until the ruddy equatorial sunset faded into the sea. Ladju's part in the operation would be simple but essential — only a dolphin could approach the silent detectors without alerting the island's defenses, and after the transfers of personnel from one craft to another had been accomplished eighty miles beyond the ring of listening devices, Ladju would lead two or three of his friends towards the island, accompanying the Squid II as far as the outer defense line, closely followed by the troop subs...

The modern calendar-clock on the stone wall had an anachronistic look, like a wristwatch on a knight. It showed 1830, 22 August, when two alarm lights went on almost simultaneously and a previously silent loudspeaker clattered to life. Two reclining Thrush guards snapped to alert as the Duty Tech hurried to check an illuminated diagram.

"What's that?" one of them asked. "Some kind of fish?"

"Uh-huh," said the Tech. "Couple of dolphins, I'd say. But there's more — or something. Just a minute... They're on two adjacent stations. That's funny."

"More than one of 'em?"

"Yeah. 247 and 248 are three-quarters of a mile apart, and both of 'em have something right up close making noise."

"Why dolphins?"

"I dunno. It *sounds* like dolphins. Maybe I'd better tape it. Dr Egret will be able to tell. In fact," he added, as a switch started reels turning, "I think I'll call her right now. My orders are to report to her if anything unusual happens, and this is unusual as far as I can tell. The Council had

held a few quick sessions, and they see armies from U.N.C.L.E. in every cloud formation."

"Me too," said the Guard. "Call Dr Egret."

The dolphins were still at it and the tapes continued to roll when Dr Egret arrived fifteen minutes later. She listened intently for a few moments, and then said, "They're taking turns. One of them talks for a minute, then the other one. How regular has that been?"

"Uh, I couldn't tell the difference. What are they talking about?"

"I haven't the least idea. Your microphones won't pick up most of their speech frequencies, and we couldn't hear them if they did." She bent over the oscilloscope and studied its cryptic green trace. "Do you have both stations on at the moment?"

"Yes."

"Turn one off."

Then only one voice emerged from the speaker, alternating something like a high-pitched Bronx cheer with an unearthly titter. Dr Egret listened intently. "Can you take that tape and slow it down?" she asked the Tech.

"Yeah — at least to quarter-speed." He started a second recorder going, stopped the first and rewound the tape a short distance. A knob was turned and the tape started again. Another switch gave them the sound, grotesquely stretched.

The Bronx cheer became a staccato "*heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh*" lasting several seconds and the titter seemed almost articulated.

"It almost sounds like it's saying, '*Erdeycum, erdeycum,*'" said the Guard, and Dr Egret nodded.

"It is strange," she agreed. "That almost seems to be a word, I'll check it in Flint's Vocabulary. I think I recognise the other sound — it's a kind of laugh a dolphin gives when he's about to play a joke on an unsuspecting victim. Most of them seem to be fond of practical jokes. I've occasionally thought they might be willing to trade services for underwater versions of a whoopee cushion or an electric buzzer." She shook her head, "How long have they been at this?"

"About a quarter of an hour. They just started up all of a sudden. We didn't even hear them approach the stations."

"You wouldn't. Switch back to the monitors, please. Let's see what they're up to now."

The tape playback stopped, and only a faint hiss and thrumm of open sea filled the room. The Tech flicked a couple of switches, then looked up and shrugged his shoulders. “Huh! They’re gone.”

Dr Egret snorted. “There was probably nothing to it,” she said. “I’ll never understand dolphins — I don’t think a human being can. In some ways they’re far better than people. But in most ways they’re just very different.”

“But a whole bunch of them — at least four, anyway — swimming up to our detectors and jabbering? What could they possibly be up to?”

“I have no idea. Some alien game, probably. I remember a couple of years ago there was one in this area who came by two or three times a week, I think it was the same one every time — it used to come up to one or another of our stations and say, ‘Hello, Doctor Lilly, hello Doctor Lilly,’ over and over for a few minutes before swimming away. Kept this up for a couple of months before it lost interest.”

“Oh well,” said the Guard, “as long as it doesn’t mean anything...”

Ten miles west of the island two submarines rode low in the dark water, linked by a short catwalk two feet above the gentle swells from the darkened bridge of the command sub to the top hatch of the Squid, where a faint greenish light showed. Alexander Waverly, bundled in his camel’s-hair coat, hat settled firmly on his head, stood in the bridge compartment to see the first assault group under way. One at a time they went up the ladder to the starlit topdeck and across after a final checkout of assignment and equipment. The pilot who would put them ashore and pull back, went first, followed by Sanders and Goldin, who would accompany Illya to the powerhouse, to settle their explosives comfortably for the short ride to shore. Voices were low, as a directional pick-up on the shore could still spot them over open sea. Dim golden lights on the eastern horizon indicated their goal.

“The main landing forces are in position,” Mr Waverly said. “They will hit the beach approximately ninety seconds after the power goes off.”

“And the power should go off about thirty seconds after I’ve hit the telephone exchange and started the jammer,” Napoleon said. “I could do it

in my sleep."

"I trust you can do it awake. Mr Kuryakin?"

"All set, sir."

A voice spoke quietly down the hatch from above. "Ready for the rest of you."

Short and Mills, Waverly's personally chosen support for Napoleon and Joan, hoisted their packs and clambered up into the warm tropical night. Illya followed them, and Joan followed Illya. Napoleon paused a moment at the foot of the ladder and turned to face his chief, uncertain of just what he wanted to say.

Mr Waverly spoke instead. "Good luck, Mr Solo. Just don't take any unnecessary chances." He extended his hand unexpectedly, and Napoleon took it.

"We've got them licked, sir," he said as they shook hands. "You may get the Nobel Prize for this night's work."

"I'd rather have you all back," said Waverly gruffly. "Now get going. The entire invasion is waiting on you. And remember, they don't know they're licked. It's up to us to convince them."

Quickly Napoleon turned and swarmed up the ladder. The hatch closed behind him before he was into the Squid, and then they were on their way.

Surf murmured on the sand behind them as the Squid silently withdrew and vanished beneath the inky surface. Ahead a black bulk blocked the stars and rising third-quarter moon which shone palely on the sloping coral a short distance to their right past the Barn. Both teams had rehearsed endlessly on photographs of this beachhead during the past twenty hours, and each individual knew his part like a trained dancer. Not a word was spoken as seven figures clad in commando black shared out equipment and separated into two groups.

Four went to the right, to the nearer corner of the high windowless wall which rose above them, the rear of the huge stone barn, almost as big as the Big House, which it nearly adjoined at the diagonally opposite corner. Three went to the left, moving like darker shadows in the star-pierced

darkness, with neat bundles of high explosives and silenced sidearms at the ready.

Illya led his team around the corner, and saw that lights burned in three windows of the Big House even at this late hour. Two Guards walked the terrace. And seventy feet of blank wall stretched from the rear corner where the U.N.C.L.E. team crouched to the side door, lighted but unguarded, which would lead them to the generator room. And forty feet of neatly trimmed lawn separated the door from the wide terrace.

They hugged the grey stone wall in the darkness and watched, timing the ritual pacing of the two Thrush Guards. Infrared sniper-scoped rifles slung at the ready could turn night into day for them at the flick of a finger.

Illya shifted slightly to peer at his watch. Eight minutes left before Napoleon could be sure of his position and the generators must go. Still, he could afford another sixty seconds while booted figures paced slowly on the terrace.

Once around his corner and into the moonlight, Napoleon left his group in a series of quick, quiet dashes from one shadow to another, spying out ahead for sentries. They paused at last behind the front corner of the Barn. At the other end of the building they could see the Big House; to their right a long dark lane between two long, low buildings — Mr Waverly's report said they were built as slave pens, but nothing of how many they must have held. Somehow appropriate that Thrush should now be using them. The communications exchange was on the upper floor of the second building. There was a convenient light directly over the double door at the near end.

Illya dropped his arm and started forward toward the distant door just as the second Guard turned away. He knew without looking back his team was with him; the three slipped into the lighted interior, crouching below the level of the glass pane in the door as it sighed slowly closed. They moved quickly out of view and looked around. Stairs ahead, descending to a deep hum and a smell of power. Six minutes to go.

Napoleon surveyed the wide yard, not to mention all but the rear of the Big House, from which they would be clearly visible, and wondered how to break unobserved across a moonlit stage. "He leaned his head close to huddle with his team.

“All right, gang,” he said. “There’s no reason to expect a total curfew, is there, Joan?”

“Not unless whatever’s left of Central declares an official state of siege, and they wouldn’t likely do that if they’ve had no warning at all we know of their existence.”

“Could we have gotten this far if there had been a state of siege declared?” asked Bob Short.

“No,” Joan admitted. “We probably would have been machine-gunned about the time we hit the beach.”

“How did you know there wouldn’t be?” asked Bill Mills, the fourth agent.

“I just didn’t think there was,” said Joan. “I was right.”

“I’m glad,” said Mills.

“So am I,” said Napoleon. “Therefore, since we won’t be shot on sight unless somebody gets the idea we’re up to something — or recognises us, which would amount to the same thing — I suggest we simply saunter across the lawn as if we knew what we were doing and go through that door just as though we had every right to be there.”

“*Toujours l’audaice*, Napoleon,” said Joan, and he stared at her for a moment.

“That’s right”, he said. “That’s one thing I never forgot about you.” Their eyes held for a moment like a kiss, and then he looked down at his watch. “Five minutes, gang. Okay — by the numbers... saunter!”

They walked easily along a hundred feet of gravel path to the middle Long Building and through the door. Stairs were on the left, as described, and the four cat-footed up them to a quiet tiled hall on the second floor.

The lower level beneath the Barn was deep. Illya and his team crept down steel steps towards a blue blaze of fluorescent lights beyond the next door panel, which opened into the tension of power, the tang of ozone and the hissing roar of working generators. Four minutes left to find the master control point and plant their charges. They moved purposefully down the short aisle between six squat pyramids towards a board full of meter faces. Good. Plenty of time to work in.

Behind a door marked INTERCOM in three scripts Solo’s team found their first action. Two startled operators turned from their switchboards to inhale a stunning breath of knockout gas and slumped from their form-

fitting chairs to the floor. Mr Short applied his attention to the lock on an unmarked door and it gave way to a dark cool closet-like room filled with racks and a sound like tiny metallic insects. Napoleon found a switch on the wall which brought shadowed light to the rack-packed room.

“There’s nothing like this place anyplace near this place,” he said, “so this must be the place. Let’s keep it small; one pound in the middle of each rack should.do it. Give the timers a synchronised start for three minutes when I give you the signal. Ready —”

The lights went out and there was a very soft *thump* under the floor.

“Oboy,” said Napoleon. “I think something’s gone wrong. Set the timers for fifteen seconds and let’s get the hell out of here!”

He pulled the antenna on the jammer, dropped it into a wooden desk drawer and slammed it closed. They made it into the corridor just as the inner door was belched across the room and a cloud of cement dust billowed out after it with a sprinkling of resistors and relays.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
“Then Don’t Touch The Other One”

The moonlight had vanished in the merciless arc-white illumination of parachute flares over the two main assault points, bracketing the center of the island. Solo stopped just inside the doors, squinting into the naked glare, as the patter of small arms fire was heard in the distance, punctuated by the *thump!* of a grenade.

They flinched back into the shadows as running footsteps skidded up the walk. The door was flung open, and they leaped upon the individual who burst in before they recognised Mr Goldin, covered with dust and blood.

“What happened?” Where’s Illya?”

“They got him — he’s wounded. An alarm got tripped in the power house and there was a Guard handy. Sanders got into the generator control room ten feet ahead of him, and I guess he set it to Manual/Zero Delay. The Guard kicking in the door was the last thing I saw.” He shuddered violently and sat down on the bottom step. “I’ll be okay in a minute.”

“Are you hurt?” said Joan, kneeling beside him. “You look a bloody mess.”

“Cut scalp — no damage. I tucked a piece of my shirt that tore off under my cap to keep the blood out of my eyes.” He shivered again. “Just shock. Besides, I think some of this was the Guard.”

“What about Illya?” Napoleon insisted.

“The Guard’s first shot hit him — I couldn’t tell how bad. He was thirty feet away from me, and I could just see his legs sticking out from behind a desk. I was pinned down behind a generator, covering Sanders, who was out in front with most of the explosives. By then there were two or three Guards, because I got one who came after Kuryakin, but another came in from the protected side and dragged him off. And just about that time Sanders yelled something and took off for the control room door. The first Guard that shot at us came running in from the other side, and another one was shooting over my head, so I didn’t see much, but I saw Sanders get into the control room and slam the door behind him, and I saw the Guard

smashing in the door just before it all blew up. That was about the last thing I saw. But Kuryakin was dragged off the other way."

Solo turned to Joan. "Where would they take him?"

"Not the Infirmary, under the circumstances... Probably one of the Interview Rooms in the basement of the Big House."

Something they couldn't see lit up the sky beyond the Big House like a flash of lightning, and the concussion of heavy artillery shook the glass doors.

"They're going to be concentrating more out towards the ends of the island," Solo said. "Think you could get me there from here?"

"I can do it underground," said Joan. "No, wait — they'll have full internal security on now. We'll have to go outside. But yes, anyway."

"All right. Short, Mills — Goldin, are you functioning?"

He nodded and stood up with a deep breath. "Can you spare me some ammunition?"

"Take mine," said Joan. "I'11 be with Mr Solo."

"Right. You three are now detached. You've still got fifteen pounds of plastique and most of a pack of fuses. Do your best with them and link up with our side whenever you can."

"But sir —" said Short.

"I can't lead a parade in there," said Solo. "And remember: don't damage anything we can use if you can help it. Now, go get 'em!"

All five flitted like deadly shadows into the twilight of the falling flares. Again the moon was the brightest illumination, and Joan and Napoleon raced across the wide grassy lawn bathed in its tender light.

She led him directly into a clump of decorative shrubbery close against the sturdy stone foundation of the Big House, and together they crouched in darkness, breathing quickly, scarcely touching. Intense and nearly continuous gunfire rattled not far away, and flashes danced beyond the Long Buildings. The tang of smokeless powder perfumed the soft tropical breeze that stirred the leaves of their hiding place.

Joan touched his shoulder and beckoned him to follow as she ducked into the narrow sheltered space between the stumps of the bushes and the wall.

On hands and knees they hurried towards the rear of the house. From time to time small unseen things smacked the stone above them and

pattered down through the dense leaves. Around the corner ahead a blue-white flash and a sound like a thunderclap made them stop and cower back.

"Are they shelling?" asked Napoleon.

"I can't tell. But I'll let you know in a minute — the door we're going in by is just around the corner. See where the Barn comes closest to the Big House? The door there is where Illya's group went in, and probably where they took him out — then straight in the rear basement door and into the first room available because by then the balloon was going up outside. Where would you go if you were a horse?"

"Right after you, sugar-lump," said Napoleon.

"Come on, clown," she said, and reached back to touch his hand momentarily before edging forward. He joined her peering around the corner close to the ground. Three tall masts, like flagpoles, stood centered on three sides of the yard. About the neat top of each shimmered a blue nimbus like St. Elmo's Fire. Electric tension filled the air with the heady pungency of ozone. As they watched, the halos grew in intensity until giant jagged sparks staggered in firey script to a point in the center where a field of some unguessable force seemed to gather them for seconds before hurtling a bolt of ferocious energy towards the moon-spangled sea.

"What's that?" said Joan.

"It's a fiendish thingie, Mark IV," said Napoleon. "Come on, while it's recharging. They're probably shooting at the Command Sub."

"I hope that door's open!"

It was closed and locked, but not for long. A thermite "skeleton key" blew the handle off and probably triggered an alarm, but nobody was likely to notice under the circumstances. Napoleon braced a heavy standing ashtray and a chair against the inside to hold it closed, muffling the sounds of battle without, while Joan checked the first few of a series of rooms on either side of the corridor.

She beckoned Napoleon silently with a quick wave of her U.N.C.L.E. Special, and he noticed as he joined her the twisted wire of a field telephone running under the third door on the left. Quietly he eased the door open, to hear a voice. "How many men in the attacking force? How many men?"

Solo kicked open the door with his automatic extended and barked, "Freeze!" A man in shirtsleeves looked up from the metal cot in the pale glare of a Coleman lantern and slowly raised his hands. "Are you alone?"

The man glanced down at the scarred leather case of the field phone in the shadow beneath his chair and said, “Yes.”

Napoleon kicked away the rifle which leaned against the chair and Joan caught it as an unsteady voice said from the cot, “Hello, Napoleon. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Neither should you. How fast can you run?”

“I don’t know. Even if I wasn’t shackled to this bunk.”

“The bunk’s bolted to the wall,” the Thrush interviewer volunteered. “And before you get rough, I don’t have any keys but my locker key, and that won’t help. Only the Chief Therapist can open them. You, whatever-your-name-is — the Guard that locked you in there didn’t even use a key, did he?”

“He’s right, Napoleon. And, honestly, I don’t feel like moving very fast.”

Solo inspected his partner’s shoulder, neatly wrapped in a field dressing which obscured the extent of the damage. “How is it?” he asked professionally.

“It could be worse. It missed major arteries and I think the shoulder joint is all right, but the left hand hasn’t been working and I’m pretty sure something is broken but I don’t know where. Besides, I think I lost about a quart of blood. Is there some water?”

“On the table,” said the interviewer.

“You drink some first,” said Solo.

“Glad to.” Rising slowly, the interviewer poured a glass of water and drank it, then-refilled the glass and held it for Illya while he drank, awkwardly.

Something slammed the building like a fist, and dust settled from the cool green walls. The table jumped, rattling the pitcher.

“*Now* they’re shelling,” said Solo. “Who’s on the other end of that phone?”

The interviewer paled. “My boss,” he hedged.

“*The* Boss? Acting Central?”

“Uh... yes...

“Okay. You ring up and tell them that they are under arrest in the name of the United Network Command For Law And Enforcement.”

The interviewer started to stall, and the fitful bell of the hand-crank set clattered discordantly. Napoleon picked up the handset, pushing the talk-switch. “Yeah?” he said impatiently.

“*Myron, this is Jay. Forget the prisoner. We’re pulling out all personnel with tech priority. You’ve got six minutes to report to Bay Four. They’re arming Little Brother. See you there, fella.*”

Napoleon looked at the silent handset for a moment, then turned to the interviewer. “Tell me, Myron,” he said thoughtfully. “Who is ‘Little Brother’ ?”

The Thrush interviewer looked around unhappily, and helped himself to another glass of water while Joan and Napoleon watched him suspiciously.

“He’s — ah — Look, how much longer are you going to keep me here? There’s no help I can give you — I’m not even worth anything as a hostage. Honest.”

“I believe you,” said Napoleon sincerely. “But Jay said ‘Little Brother’ as if he expected you to know what it meant, and although I only spoke with him for a moment on the telephone I feel I can trust his judgment in this. And by the by — he also said to tell you they were pulling out all personnel with tech priority. I forget where he said they were leaving from, but I doubt if they’ll miss you in all the confusion, and they didn’t seem likely to wait. Who is ’Little Brother’ ?”

He glanced at Joan, who shook her head. “He’s new since my time,” she said. “But Myron looks terribly upset all of a sudden. Take a load off your conscience,” she advised him.

“Yes. Unburden your soul,” directed Napoleon coldly. “This may be your last chance to save it. Co-operate — and the next time you go to sleep you can expect to wake up.”

The interviewer laughed, unexpectedly. “Not with Little Brother,” he said. “We’ll never even notice him.” He sat down, and shrugged. “There are worse ways to go.”

“There may be for you,” said Napoleon. “I’ve got better things to do with my time.” He grinned quickly at Joan. “So they’ve got a bomb under the house, huh? Where is it?”

“Does it matter? If it’ll make you happy to know, it’s a fifty kiloton nuclear warhead we hijacked a couple of years ago. There’s a lot of research

on this island that shouldn't be allowed loose in the world."

Concussion buffetted them again, and a crack shot up one wall. The table danced and only a quick grab by Napoleon saved the Coleman lantern from toppling. Their shadows leaped high on the walls as he swung it, hissing, by its wire handle. "We need to know, Myron," he said flatly. "Where is Little Brother?"

Outside, beyond the Long Buildings to the south, flames clawed at the star-crusted, smoke-smeared sky, lit red from beneath like the fires of hell. In this infernal glare men ran and fired, and rose to run again or fell and fired no more. Quonsets vibrated like giant steel drums to the slamming penetration of slugs, and the sharp cough of U.N.C.L.E. Specials underscored the short vicious snarl of Thrush automatic rifles.

From half a mile off-shore, through a light-amplifying video pickup to his place on the bridge of the command sub, Alexander Waverly watched his forces moving in along the island, units checking the outer points to their rear while the rest centered attention on isolating the central complex and moving in on it. With full magnification he could see machine guns on the roof above the veranda, protected by reinforced cornices, ready to rain fire on the invaders. Something had to be done about the Big House. And that strange thing behind the Big House, which was shooting something at him — though only the periscope showed above the surface, it seemed to attract the bolts like a lightning rod. Something would have to be done about *that*, too.

"Captain," he said. "Surface. We must direct our deck gun against the Big House. Aim first into the yard, there, then ease up on the building. Give their gun crews a chance to evacuate. It's more than they'd give us."

The deck shifted slightly as the sub rose, and then the top hatch was swung back to pass the three-man gun crew, scampering up a ladder to the dripping deck and a smell of salt and oil.

Illya balanced Joan's Special in his good right hand while she had a long serious talk with their captive Thrush. Napoleon took the opportunity to scout the basement area in preference to sitting in on the interview — he started by following the phone wires to the foot of a stygian stairwell, where he stopped and tugged experimentally on them. There was no give; probably a door closed on them somewhere. And it wasn't time to go upstairs yet.

At least not all the way... Silenced automatic ready, he traced the twisted line up the side of the stairs to a landing and around the corner into total darkness. No, not total. Above him a glass double door shone in ruddy rectangles against which shifting shadows ran back and forth. Rifles chattered nearby and Napoleon hugged the wall as he crept upwards towards the dim light.

Sure enough, the wires were wedged tightly under the door, and the door was locked. He could kick it open, but that would attract undue attention, and he had enough to worry about without adding trigger-happy Thrush Guards. A slug snapped through the top pane of the left-hand door and dust powdered down on him from the stone ceiling. He severed the phone wire with his commando knife and retreated, dragging the end with him.

He looped it around the railing at the foot of the stairs and went on exploring. He spent a few more minutes familiarising himself with the layout of the cellar, and then returned to base.

Joan looked up as he tapped at the door and entered. "It's in Room 39," she said. "He started to soften shortly after you left. I simply pointed out that if he co-operated convincingly he wouldn't have to be hurt a lot before he died, and if he didn't it'd be interesting to see if he would last until the balloon went up."

"A well-made point," said Napoleon. "How well did you know Ward Baldwin? Never mind. Room 39, huh?"

"I'll take you there," Myron volunteered.

"Don't bother," said Solo. "I found it on my walk. I also got a peek upstairs. It's full of Guards, and they're all shooting out windows. Even our private entrance has almost been secured.

"Almost?"

“They dropped steel shutters behind the door some time after we came in, but the chair I stuck there to hold it closed jammed them halfway. I think we could squeeze through if we wanted to go out that way.”

A brief glare of orange flashed down the hall just as another blast slapped the back of the building. A piece of plaster detached itself from the ceiling and shattered on the floor.

“Personally,” he added, “I’d rather wait.”

“But not here,” said Myron anxiously. “Farther in.”

“My friend doesn’t have the choice. I’m going to Room 39 to see if something can be done about Little Brother. Maybe there’s some wires I can cut or something.”

“They’re going to set it off by radio. It’s all sealed, once it’s been armed.”

“Not likely, Napoleon,” said Illya. “There’s got to be some way of disarming it. I could probably work it out in a few minutes...”

“Well, I wish I could bring it in here for you to work on.”

“Hey, look,” said Myron. “We ought to get out of here.”

Without turning around, Napoleon said, “Joan— put him to sleep.”

“Check.”

“The box they’d dug these field phones out of was stuck here behind the door,” Solo continued as Joan dealt efficiently with the Thrush, “and there are three more sets. If I go in there and tell you what I see, can you tell me what to do?”

There was silence for a few seconds. Illya’s pale face was almost lost in shadow and Napoleon read little on it before he said, “I suppose I can try. What tools do you have?”

“I’ve got the commando knife, and a few thermite skeleton keys. And the Special.”

“Nothing smaller?” said Joan. “Here.” From somewhere she produced a nailfile and a hairpin. “You can’t use a commando knife inside a circuit board. Take these.”

“I’ll drag the other end of this wire over to Room 39,” he said. “It ran all the way to the next stairwell and up. I cut it just inside the door when I took a look into the upstairs. It’s a beautiful old place.”

“Remind me someday to tell you about the formal banquets there.”

“Tomorrow,” said Napoleon. “On our way home.”

“Tonight,” said Illya. “Just because they won’t blow up the place until total defeat is inevitable doesn’t mean we can afford to stand around. How much faith do you have in our side, anyway? I expect them to come in that back door any moment.”

“I’m gone,” said Napoleon, and was.

He returned a moment later. “One thing,” he said. “I’m going to have to take the lantern with me for light to work by.”

“Napoleon —” said Joan, but he was gone again and darkness filled the room. A moment later another shell burst against the back of the house, throwing Joan against the table. She recovered her balance and sneezed. More plaster crunched under her feet as she groped for the chair, which had been tipped over. From somewhere she could hear the insistent dripping of water.

“Illya — are you all right?”

“The bed has good springs, but the concussions make my head ache. And I find it hard to focus in the dark. Where are you?”

“Over here, near where the chair was. I’m looking for the phone pack. Here it is.”

“Where’s Myron?”

“Tucked in a corner, fast asleep. He’s as safe as we are.”

Another shell struck nearby and the room shuddered. A moment later the phone bell clattered.

“U.N.C.L.E. Field Base J-for-Joan. Go ahead.”

“*What would you have done if this hadn’t been me?*”

“I’d’ve thought of a good one quick. Where are you?”

“*At the door of Room 39. I’m about to blow my way in, and thought I’d check the phone first. There’s no particular —*” The phone cut off.

Joan listened. Silence pressed against her ear, and only the distant sound of intermittent gunfire outside filled the quiet. Something exploded far away towards the front of the house, more felt than heard. “Napoleon? I’ve lost your signal...”

“What is it?” Ilya asked, struggling to raise himself on his good elbow.

“I don’t know,” said Joan. “He’s there, but —”

“*Hey, are you still there?*” —

“Where would I go?”

"*Sorry for dropping you like that, but a couple of Guards were on their way past and wondered what I was doing. And — Hah! There goes the door. Okay...stay with me, now...*"

"What's going on?" Illya insisted.

"He had to shoot a couple of Guards — just blew the door to Room 39. He's going inside now."

"What does it look like? Any exposed controls at all?"

"What do you see?" Joan prompted.

"*Not much. There's a grey metal wall panel which makes this room about half as deep as Illya's.*"

"Any instruments, controls, signs, etcetera?"

"*Nothing.*"

"Nothing," Joan relayed. "It fills half the room, though."

"*There's a couple of small panels with counter-sunk screws. I didn't see them until I looked closely.*"

"Ask him if there are any access panels."

"He just found a couple."

"Tell him to open them. They probably aren't booby-trapped — you needn't mention the idea."

"*Ask Illya if I should open them.*"

"He just said you should. Look — you two are reading each other's minds anyway. Illya can hold the phone himself."

"*Okay. I'll be busy for a while, but the round end of your nailfile fits these screwheads pretty well. I'll ring you back after I get one off. Hey, which one should I take off first? One is eyelevel on the far right and the other is halfway to the left about a foot above the floor. And they're both about a foot on a side.*"

Joan relayed the data to Illya, who said, "Tell him... No, give me the phone. Hello, Napoleon — open the upper one first if it's got an insulated edge around it. The lower one's probably something —"

An explosion on the floor above dropped blocks of stone from their ceiling and stunned them for a moment. When Illya found the phone under his right shoulder, it was saying tinnily, "*Hello? Illya? Hello? Are you still there?*"

"Right here, Napoleon. All okay. Call me before you do anything else after opening the panel."

“*There’s no insulation showing on either of them.*”

“Take the upper one anyway.

“*Check. Upper right panel. I’ll call you back.*”

Illya let the handset drop to his pillow wearily. “He’s working on it,” he said. “He’ll call us back.” His voice was strained, and his breathing irregular.

There was only the endless distant sound of war overhead and the occasional shocks of explosions which had lost their power to terrify. Joan knelt on the plaster-sharded floor beside the metal frame bed and leaned her head against it, suddenly tired. It was quiet for several seconds, and then Illya said, “Joan?”

“Yes?”

“I’m getting a little fuzzy. You’d better talk to me, so I can stay awake. Napoleon should be calling back in a couple of minutes — and I have the feeling if I let go now I might not be very easy to wake up. So talk to me. What was going on outside when you came in?”

“Our main assault force was ashore and moving in. Something was burning, down beyond the Long Buildings.”

“What happened in the powerhouse after Sanders tripped the alarm? Do you have any idea?”

“Oh, yes; Goldin made it out. Sanders managed to accomplish the target and took out a Guard and himself in the process. Medal of Honor material.

“Worthy of him. I wonder how Napoleon’s doing...

“Illya, I’d like to ask *you* some questions. If you don’t mind —”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve worked with Napoleon for six years. According to your personal files you are each other’s closest friends — and this business tends to discourage such things. And now that I’ve found him again after all these years — and so close to losing him forever — I wish you could tell me what he’s really like, now.”

There was silence for a moment before Ilya said, “Actually, I don’t think I really know him that well. There has always been much about him that I didn’t understand.” He paused, thinking. “For a long time he was fearless — almost suicidally so. But in the last couple of years he’s seemed to sober up. In some respects, I’d say —”

The phone rang, and Illya found the handset. “Kuryakin.”

“*There’s a valve handle, in a box. Nothing else.*”

“Rats. What does it say on the valve handle? Anything stamped or written on it? Is it metal?”

Pause.

“*Yeah. Metal, with P.J.V.R. stamped on it. All caps, with periods.*”

“Try turning it.”

“*It turns in both directions. Shall I leave it centered where it was?*”

“No, turn it all the way to the left for good luck,” said Illya. “And go to work on the other panel.”

“*It’ll be easier*,” said Napoleon cheerfully. “*The lantern’s on the floor. I hope it was full of fuel.*”

“You may have a little longer, by the way — whoever was knocking at the back door seems to have given up. The dust is settling back here. But don’t take all night — there are lots of places I’d rather be.”

“*You may be there before you know it. I’ll ring back when I get the second panel off. What should I hope to see?*”

“Some switches, some wires. Probably a light or two. Call me.” He dropped the phone and slumped back, breathing harshly.

“I just remembered,” he said after a few seconds. “The rest of the field surgical kit — is in the drawer of that little table — next to the closet. I saw the Guard put it there. Can you find it?”

“Probably,” said Joan, and groped away through the darkness.

“There’s some morphine in there. Just get it ready. I can’t have any until we’re through this, but I’ll want it ready. Besides, they gave me adrenalin before Myron started talking to me and it hasn’t worn off yet.

“But you wanted to know about Napoleon. He likes boats — oh, of course he told you about his 27-footer, the *Pursang*...”

“What’s his favorite color?”

“Color? I haven’t the least idea. His favorite wine...”

Several wooden buildings on both sides of the island were roaring skyward in flames, and the waning moon was obscured by the smoke of their burning. The rear of the Big House was a cratered ruin, thin topsoil

scattered and coral blasted to dust. No more lightning was flung at the sea, and no more shells were being fired; the surface moved dark and peaceful.

The invading force from U.N.C.L.E. was stalled, running into concerted defense through the Long Buildings to the south and from the fortified Guard Quarters to the north of the Big House. Once again light machine guns perched behind concrete cornices of the old mansion, sleeting leaden death on anything that moved in their free-fire zone. Their infrared sniperscopes were aided by the flickering heat of the rising flames before which the U.N.C.L.E. troops advanced and towards which they were forced to retire again. Something fat and shiny in an upper storey window spat whirling spheres of yellow-white fire across the open yard to the north, and uniformed figures scampered away from its line of fire, as bullets spattered the stonework about the window.

Downstairs Joan could only tell that the gunfire overhead was less frequent, and the shelling seemed to have stopped. It was comparatively restful now in the darkness of the cell, and breathing was easier as the dust settled.

"... He played lacrosse in college — and I remember he threw the javelin..." Illya's voice murmured softly, prompted occasionally by Joan, as they waited for the telephone to ring again. It might have been five minutes, it might have been fifteen.

When it rang, Joan grabbed the handset. "U.N.C.L.E. base," she said. "How is it?"

"*Pretty good, I guess, but I'd better talk directly to Illya.*"

Joan helped the Russian prop the phone on the pillow next to his ear, his right hand operating the talk switch.

"Right here, Napoleon," he said. "What do you see?"

"*A mess of wires. There are a few switches — not mounted, just hanging in there between wires. And there's a red pilot light on — and an orange one, a blue one, and a green one that aren't on. Is that good?*"

"I wouldn't count on it. What color are the wires leading to the light that is on?"

"*Uhhhhh, lemme see... One of them is red and one's a red-green stripe...*"

"Trace them back and see which one goes to a switch. It should be the striped one."

"*...and one is a blue-and-white stripe. What did you say?*"

"Never mind. Trace both striped ones, and the red one too. Tell me which goes where."

"*Okay. Hey — the blue light just went on. The red one is still on. What does that mean?*"

"I don't know yet. Trace the red wire first," said Illya. "And see if there's any way you can get through the panel into the triggering mechanism —unless there's a wiring diagram stuck inside the door."

"*Nope. I looked. The solid red wire goes with a bundle out a ltttle hole in the lefthand side. The red-green goes with a bundle out the back. The blue-white wire runs to a switch, and another blue-white runs...ah...to the green light? That doesn't seem right. Just a minute.*"

Something like a grenade went off somewhere overhead. "Don't take that minute," said Illya urgently. "Can you get past the wiring? Can you get into the space beyond that wall?"

"*I'll see.*"

"What's happening?" Joan asked as a machine gun stammered intently above them.

"Trying to get at the mechanism," said Illya. "Sounds as if the attack has picked up again. If Thrush is going to wait until this building is taken before they set off that device, they may not have too much longer to wait. Incidentally, did you get a look at some of the underground areas on your way —"

"*Illya, you there?*"

"Right here."

"*I've got two panels pried loose — and finally broke the blade of my knife. There's something about as big as my desk up on a trestle, and a box with cables. Some of them lead up to that box in the wall with the lights and switches in it. I'm behind the wall now and looking around... That pipe with the valve on it leads into the big thing on the trestle — and there's another pipe out the bottom. What is it?*"

“There’s a water jacket around the device; a steady flow of water past it is monitored for radioactivity to detect leaks. The water’s off, so I had you close the valve. It might come back on with a pressure surge, and this way the inner casing will be protected. Tell me about that box with the cables.”

“*It’s solid all the way around. Maybe I could break into it, maybe not. There’s one fat cable to the thing, though, and... Lemme see... “No, it won’t unplug.*”

“Don’t cut it! Can you get into the mechanism?”

“*Through the water jacket?*”

“No, like where the plug goes in. That should be right up at the front, and it might not be solid.”

“*I’ll see.*”

“Be gentle.”

Five irregularly spaced blows in as many seconds bludgeoned the building, and there was a heavy roar like a wall caving in upstairs. Simultaneously a thunderous wave of smoke and shrapnel filled the hallway as the outside door was blasted by a high-explosive charge.

“*I’ll work on it. It sounds as if the mortars are coming up. Aren’t you glad you’re in a nice safe bombshelter instead of out here where it’s dangerous? Okay, I’m going into the firing mechanism now...*”

The Big House was built like a fortress, and would have to be stormed like one. Outer defenses fallen, the stone mansion stood, deadly fire spitting unabated from shuttered casements and sheltered crannies. A hold gaped in one third-floor wall where a missile had found the narrow opening of a window, and porch pillars around three sides were bullet-pocked and splintered.

Beyond the Barn and to both sides, the U.N.C.L.E. forces now surrounded the house, unable to make a decisive attack. Sustained mortar fire had hardly diminished the defensive capacity of the Big House, but now scattered attack groups were gathering themselves for one concerted rush. Dark-windowed, bulking against flame-lashed clouds of smoke behind which hidden armies clashed, it stood like a besieged tower of dark

sorceries in some legendary war. Then another mortar shell blasted its flank, and white stone fragments flew.

"*Yeah, they lead to a lock like an ignition switch on a car.*"

"Any numbers on it?"

"*None. Hey, how's your room holding up? It sounds like you're taking a beating back there.*"

"I can't tell. It's still dark. But I think part of the ceiling came down a few minutes ago."

"*Is Joan okay?*"

"She's just fine. Right here holding the phone for me. There should be two more wires coming out of that lock, one off the right side and one off the bottom."

"*I can't get at the back of the lock — it's set into a welded box. Two other wires come out together, twisted around each other. One's yellow and green, one's purple and white.*"

"Where do they go?"

"*Down inside. I can't see where. Into the casing, I think.*"

There was a long silence, broken by a shuddering blast somewhere above them and the hysterical chatter of machine gun fire. Another blast punched down the hall outside and shook the door in its frame.

"*Illya? There's these two wires...*"

Illya took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Okay, Napoleon. Cut one of them."

"*Check.*"

Raduysya Mariye, blagodati poliaya, Gospod s't'voyu; blagoslovyenna ti neshdu shenami i blagoslovyen' plod' chryeva tvoyevo Iisus'. Svyataya Mariye, matyer' Bozhi, ya moli o nas' gruishnikh' ninui i v' chas' smyerti nashyey. Amin'. Illya's lips barely moved as he subvocalised the old, old words. Ages passed in the seconds before Napoleon said, "*Okay — one cut.*"

"Don't touch the other one. Just check and see if the red light is out, and you might bend the cut ends away from each other and the other wire."

"*I just did. Hang on.*"

“Joan?”

She stirred beside him. “Is he there?”

“I’m going to want that morphine, I think. Can you open it in the dark?” Illya’s voice was tense and unsteady.

“Yes — just a second.”

“*Illya? The blue light is still on but the red one is out. Oh-oh! The orange light just flashed. Now it’s out. Now it’s on again — what’s happening?*”

“If the red light’s out, the bomb’s disarmed. I’d bet the orange means the radio signal is being received. Don’t worry about it — just get back here. The war is coming this way and you won’t want to miss it. I’m afraid I will have to.” He dropped the phone, and Joan took it.

“Napoleon?” she asked it tentatively, but no answer came. She pushed the field phone under the bed and stood up stiffly in the dark.

“I’ll take that morphine now,” Illya said, and his voice was suddenly very tired.

“Where’s your...”

“I can find myself better in the dark — give it to me.”

“Shut up and relax. I’ve done this before. You’ll wake up in a nice hospital room and I’ll bring you a jar of caviar.”

“Ouch! Was that the blunt end?”

“Good night, Illya. It’ll come on in a few seconds.”

He gasped, “Can you find the water? I can feel it starting. My arm is starting to go away...”

She groped around and found the plastic pitcher on its side on the floor with a few ounces of water still unspilled. She held it to Illya’s lips. He gulped quickly from it, then rinsed his mouth before sinking back to the thin mattress. His breathing was deeper and slower now, and his voice slurred as he said, “Wake me up when the war is over...”

A shifting light outside the door and a quick tapping heralded Napoleon’s return. Joan jumped up and ran to him with a little cry, to wrap her arms around him and clung close against him for a moment.

“Polie!” she said. “It’s been dark so long!”

A series of blasts overhead showered plaster on them, clouds of white in the hissing glare of the gasoline lantern as they embraced, drawing renewed strength from each other.

“How’s Illya?”

“Out. He wouldn’t take the morphine until you were through in there, but he’s good for twelve hours now.”

“He’ll be safe enough here,” said Napoleon. “Our exit is now blocked solidly, by the way. Come on — I’ll show you. Grab that lantern.”

The harsh white glare showed a sloping wall of rubble filling the entire end of their hall. Timbers jutted like broken ribs where the ceiling had caved in.

“We’ll have to go out upstairs,” said Napoleon. “So I thought we might as well leave Illya, who is as secure here as he can be, and wander along to join the party.”

“And harass the foe from the rear,” Joan said. “I’ll requisition Illya’s ammunition — it was with the rest of his things in the closet. I seem to recall a back stairs we might try...”

She cast about through a couple of corridors, then nodded. “Up here,” she said. “We shouldn’t take the light past here. There’s a door right at the top of the stairs, second flight. Let me go first.”

She led the way up narrow wooden steps and around a corner. The lantern was lost behind them, but gunfire from ahead echoed between the close plaster walls as they crept upward.

The door swung quietly open into chaos. Fumes reeked through the hall and guns barked on either side. “Here we go,” said Napoleon. “Stick close behind me. We’ll use silencers, snipe from cover and keep shifting around. They may not even tumble we’re here.”

“A beautiful thought.”

“And remember, Joan — I love you.”

“I love you, Napoleon.”

“Now — let’s go!”

They ducked out the door and down the hall. A bulky desk athwart the corridor accorded them momentary shelter, and Napoleon took the opportunity to assemble his U.N.C.L.E. Special. He swiftly unscrewed the flash-shield and replaced it with the long barrel extension, drew the Bushnell Phantom 1.3X15 scope from its velvet-lined sleeve, slipped it into

its shoe and tightened the locking screw, snapped the collapsing telescoping stock into its slot in the butt, pulled it out to full length and twisted it to lock it open, then folded out the shoulder-plate to latch at right angles. Finally he slipped out the eight-round magazine — still with five shots left — and replaced it with the sixteen-round clip. He snuggled the lean, gracefully ugly weapon to his shoulder and peered through its scope into the smoky darkness beyond.

Concussion shattered through a wall seventy feet behind them, and they ducked against flying rocks. A dozen Thrush Guards came running out of the smoke, and were cut down by steady fire from Napoleon and Joan. An automatic rifle snarled briefly from the other side and they dropped to the floor, swinging their muzzles in that direction. A moment later a spray of slugs blasted splinters out of their desk, and Napoleon broke into a sprint across the hall to an alcove already occupied by a bronze statue on a four-foot pedestal; shrinking behind it into the curve he directed one-handed shots into a pillared doorway down the hall.

Joan leaped to her feet and dashed along the wall to the next open door, where she paused and snapped a slug towards the end of the hall. Instantly Napoleon moved again, directly toward her target, as chips of cement splattered beside him and battered slugs whined away into the flame-tinted darkness. As he approached her line of fire, she too broke from cover and followed him in a zig-zag dash into the vaulted room which opened before them.

Ruddy light danced on the domed ceiling of a generous rotunda through a half-circle of windows looking out over the lagoon. Booths lined the wide walls, and large comfortable furniture and extinguished lamps dotted the floor. Men crouched behind shattered windows, firing and ducking back as bullets dug into the walls or splintered the edge of glass-sharded panes.

“This is the Library,” said Joan as they crouched together again behind a horsehair sofa. “We’re at the front of the house, facing east, close to the south corner. There’s a big flight of steps to the porch just outside here.”

“Sounds like most of the fighting is around on the side of the house. Let’s reduce the local opposition.”

Five Guards fell among the defenders within a minute before the survivors began to react. Napoleon and Joan ducked as they saw silhouettes

turn infrared sniperscopes in their directions.

"Stay low," Napoleon whispered. "Their rifles are sighted for a hundred yards. They'll shoot high."

"Check."

A voice to their left yelled something and a slug burst through the sofa from that side. They vanished like rabbits and fired futilely in the direction of the shout. Joan replaced her first clip and claimed another Guard with her next shot; they then had to move again, towards the sheltered rear corner of the room.

Napoleon dodged across an open space and around an armchair, and something like a truck bumper hit him in the side of the head. It knocked him sprawling across the polished floor, helpless before the impact, until he skidded half under a divan. He twisted, dragging his right arm around from under him. Half dazed, he saw a foot descending towards his face, saw his own hands grab for the foot and twist. He heard the Thrush yelp as he was flipped over backwards, his head hitting the padded arm of a chair.

Napoleon steadied himself against the divan as he tried to stand. His attacker rolled smoothly to all fours and flowed to his feet, pulling a long murderous Bowie knife from what must have been a specially designed sheath under his jacket. Seeing the gleam of steel in the uncertain light, Napoleon recognised the lean scarred face grinning like a skull a few feet away and realised exactly who his opponent was: Kiazim Refet, Thrush's number one assassin. Illya had met him in Australia and escaped with his life — with a little help. Now it was Napoleon's turn.

Refet crouched, shifting gently from side to side, the blade floating above his right hand. Napoleon fell instinctively into his defensive stance as adrenalin blazed into his system and focussed his clearing mind on the man facing him. He knew that at that moment, wielding twelve inches of steel, Kiazim Refet was the most dangerous man in the world. And he knew that unless he made the first move he would be dead in moments.

Napoleon feinted, kicking sharply out with his right foot and switching it aside as Kiazim slashed down with the vicious blade. As it flicked through the space beside his leg, he lashed up with a full kick, catching the Turk under his chin and driving him back against the wall.

Refet rebounded like a rubber tire and lurched towards him, knife flailing as he recovered his balance. Solo stepped back, and his heel turned

behind him on the stock of his fallen U.N.C.L.E. Special — his only possible defense. Swiftly he shrugged off his shoulder rig, catching the leather loop in his right hand, and whipped the empty holster forward as Kiazim lunged, slashing it across his face. Blood spurted just above the Turk's left eye and he ducked back a step, half-blinded.

Napoleon dived to grab the Special lying at his feet as Kiazim leaped towards him again, his face a gory mask of hate. Evidently the Turk's depth perception was impaired, for he struck two inches short as Napoleon snatched the Special from the floor to catch the blade between the 'scope and barrel of his gun and twisted the knife forward and down, out of Kiazim's grasp.

Uncoiling like a spring, Napoleon drove forward from his crouch with every ounce of effort in his body behind the stiff-armed U.N.C.L.E. Special, slamming it up into the bridge of the Turk's nose. Cartilage crunched as it burst like a pomegranate and blood gouted over the pistol.

With a hoarse groan, Kiazim staggered back, clutching his mutilated face with his left hand, snatching Solo's flimsy turtleneck with his right. Unable to swing his long barrel around to fire at this close range, Napoleon brought the gun down across the hairy arm with a dull slap. Kiazim shrieked as his hand was torn free of Napoleon's shirt and flopped Timply at the end of a splintered wrist.

Napoleon reversed his swing and launched the gun upwards again with a force born of sheer terror; Kiazim, in a last desperate move, lashed out with a vicious, shattering kick across Napoleon's right knee just as the heavy butt of the U.N.C.L.E. Special smashed into his nose again, driving the broken splinters of bone up into his brain. Both men hit the floor — Napoleon face down, his right leg twisted at an impossible angle under him, and Kiazim Refet on his back a few feet away, dead.

Through a gathering haze of shock and dull agony, Napoleon saw Joan stumbling through the dimness toward him. He tried to move and something grated in his leg.

Then Joan was beside him, dragging an overstuffed chair as a shield behind her. "Okay," she said, "you picked it. This is where we make our last stand. Can you see to shoot?"

He tried to twist to a sitting position, but part of his leg wouldn't work at all. It hadn't started to hurt yet, but there was that aching numbness of

shock...

“Where were you when I needed you?”

“Twenty feet away, and I never got a shot. It was all over in ten seconds. He’s dead, you know.”

“I hope so. Help me up. Mind the leg —”

Eight rifles tracked them, and only two pistols could reply. Slugs smashed into the wall above them and plunked cotton batting from the chair, but Napoleon managed to get off a few shots before his eyes began to mist over.

“Joan —” he said. “I don’t think I can hold this thing steady anymore. There’s five rounds in my left pocket...”

Four Guards charged the hasty barricade as running footsteps and a blast of gunfire outside preceded the slam of a grenade at the front door. Joan stood, her own unadorned Special in her left hand and Napoleon’s fully assembled one in her right, shooting from the hip, alternately one and then the other, firing into the shadows where other Guards crouched, spraying lead at the outer door where dozens of running black-clad figures were bursting in amid smoke and thunder. The four Guards crumpled before Joan’s deadly fire, and she shouted over the confusion, “U.N.C.L.E.! This way! This way!”

Three men ran out of the smoke, guns pointed at Joan, who was waving the assembled Special over her head like a flag. “Solo’s here,” she said urgently. “He’s wounded. Kuryakin’s in the basement, safe but also wounded. How’s the battle going?”

“I think we’re getting it together,” said Mr Mills.

“What’s going on up there?” said Napoleon, dragging himself up on the arm of the chair to hang half over it. “Did we win?”

“There’s a lot of underground area to be cleaned out, sir, but this Big House was the last major organised resistance. There’s a whole lot of underground shops, by the way. *Big* stuff.”

A grenade went off down the hall and Mr Short looked around. “There’s a few things to take care of here yet, too,” he observed.

“And d’you remember the nerve gas that was dumped in the Atlantic about a week ago? It’s here. They were unloading it from a submarine down in one of the pens. They’ve got facilities for a dozen full-sized subs down there!”

“We also caught two sub-loads of technical personnel just outside the lagoon — they’ve surrendered. Apparently nobody got away.”

“You mean we’ve won.”

“I’d say so. We’ll get a field surgeon to you right away. Jackson, go for a medic, would you?”

“What’s that light out there beyond the lagoon?”

“It’s dawn, sir.”

“Already? How time flies when you’re having fun!”

“One other thing, Mr Solo,” said Short. “You’ll want to report back to headquarters as soon as possible. We’ll give you a full report on the situation, but there are a lot of things they want to know and you are the man to tell them what to do.”

“Me?”

“Mr Solo — you are now active Section One, Number One. Mr Waverly’s command sub was blown to pieces by a counter-attack from the island about half an hour ago. There could not have been any survivors — one of the support subs a quarter-mile away was damaged by the blast. I’m sorry, sir...”

Napoleon’s face was deathly grey in the eerie half-light, and he turned blindly to Joan before sagging forward over the chair and slipping limply to the floor, unconscious.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
“Sometime Again, Napoleon”

On an afternoon late in the year, Ward Baldwin sat in the study of the tall old house on Alamo Square, and contemplated a high-sided wooden tray. It was divided into dozens of compartments, each as wide and half as high as the packs of tall cards which stood in them. Four knitting needles rested in a groove along one side of the box, and a representation of a card was painted on the front surrounded by arrows and numbers.

Each of the fifteen hundred or so cards represented a professional criminal who had worked in London just before the turn of the century. It showed his name, his contact, his specialty and his price, along with his police record, physical measurements and notes on his talents, training and limitations. All key information was repeated in the coded notches along the top and both sides of each card. A regular pattern of holes edged every card — holes large enough to pass a knitting needle. If a card represented a safe-cracker, the first, third and fourth holes on the right side were clipped out to leave open notches. Passing three needles through the appropriate aligned holes in the full pack would lift out every card except those of all safecrackers, whatever else they might be. A murderer was represented by another notch code; a fence, an arsonist, a forger, all could be sorted out of the hundreds of professional criminals here catalogued in seconds.

This primitive box of Hollerith cards had grown in the founding office of the Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity during the first few years of their pioneering operation. Building from an earlier, individually run organisation, they had applied the most advanced methods of their time to the problem of undisciplined crime and the establishment of a central information service which maintained certain control and direction over the activities of its clients. In twenty years — with the help of the first outbreak of the Great European War — the Hierarchy had become truly international. The acronymic nickname was coined in 1919, and the first warbird symbol appeared in 1923 on a blazer badge in Chicago.

During the first and fourth decades of the Twentieth Century they reorganised internally, broadening their base of power. Then when the simmering pot of The War returned to a boil, and the world erupted a second time, the Hierarchy was ready to profit from both sides.

The War had brought him Irene, he reflected, and set in motion events that had brought him all else he wanted from life: San Francisco, a comfortable income and freedom to pursue his own researches. He didn't expect to change his way of life just because the Hierarchy had fallen — though the data banks of Thrush Central had been seized legally after all, with a special warrant signed by the Governor, the name of Ward Baldwin was entered there only for royalty payments on several dozens of his patents, and only those texts could be subpoenaed. His lawyer would appear in court to explain just why.

Months had passed, and nothing had been heard from Central. If the Island were still in operation, no word had come to any of his friends on five continents. Could it be possible that after three-quarters of a century the Hierarchy was no more? He had been born in the same month that five men met in London to form the First Council, he mused. So much had happened since then.

But the Hierarchy was more than men and machines — it was more than the reels of magnetic tape and files of paper. Like this tray of cards, the value in the Hierarchy was information. Tape can be erased, and paper can be burnt, but data can be endlessly duplicated or be carried in the untappable mind or generated anew. Patterns erased from the tape or burned with the paper have a ghostly life of their own, and can never be destroyed, only lost for a while.

There came a tap at the door as he sat musing, and Irene entered at his invitation. She held an envelope and a card in her hand.

"Ward, this note just arrived in the mail. I thought you should see it — it's from Mr Kuryakin. He says Alexander Waverly is dead."

"Waverly, eh? Does he say when or how?"

"No, but apparently it was some time ago. He says both he and Mr Solo have been incapacitated or he would have written sooner, but he doesn't go into details."

Baldwin sighed. "Old Waverly. He was a year younger than I, you know. A fine man; I wish I could have known him better. Interesting

coincidence, don’t you think; all this incapacitation in the fighting arm of U.N.C.L.E. — but it gives me the odd feeling we may not expect to hear from Central at all for quite some time, my dear. Remarkable... One can’t help but wonder how it was accomplished.”

“And this one is addressed to both of us. The postmark is the same but the handwriting is different.”

Baldwin slit the envelope and drew out an inner, unsealed envelope. This yielded an engraved card which he regarded seriously for several seconds before passing to his wife.

“Mr Solo is getting married! How nice,” said Irene. “I wonder who Joan Galton is.”

“Her second married name,” said Baldwin in an odd voice, “was Perry. Widow of a Thrush Tech, with us almost twenty years. Did you know she was involved with Mr Solo before he started with U.N.C.L.E.? I’d wondered about that. Her profile had recommended she be kept away from him.”

“Somehow they seem to have gotten back together despite everything,” Irene observed. “Wait! Joan Perry — wasn’t she —”

“She was working in our BioPsych section when last seen. She took a weekend’s leave early in August, just before things started to go wrong, and never came back. And I had written her off.” He chuckled. “Now that I think of it, she checked out the same night Stevens was killed — and she was the last one to talk to him. I remember noticing that when her AWOL case came up.” He chuckled again. “I do believe Mr Solo has put one over on us,” he said, tapping bony fingers on his knee.

“Now, Ward, you weren’t going to do something to spoil things for them. It’s too late to help Thrush, and vengeance is a sour dish for an old mouth.”

“Vengeance?” said Baldwin. “Nonsense. Waverly played the game fairly and won — I’m glad to have escaped the sinking of the Hierarchy with no more damage than a slight tightening of the belt. After all, I still have you — and Robin, and my work.”

“And two thousand dollars a month in industrial royalties.”

“I’ll miss the computer — most of my working data is still on microfilm in the files, but it was convenient to have it available through the terminal. Perhaps we could subscribe to a service locally. Varan Haruchi

picked up most of the old hardware. He might be persuaded to trade service for service... I must contact Saul Panzer in New-York, and have him find out how Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin are, Perhaps some appropriate observance...

Napoleon shifted uncomfortably in his antique formal attire, and shook his head at Illya. They sat in an ivied niche at the foot of a wide lawn and a sunlit crowd around white-draped tables. “I must say I never expected my best man to show up in full dress uniform as an Admiral in the —”

“Vice-Admiral, Napoleon. Remember, I was originally detached from Russian Naval Intelligence, and my commission is still with them. Besides,” he smiled, “I thought it lent a touch of color to your drab ceremony in pink and grey with a little bit of yellow. Now, you should see a village wedding in the Ukraine, with bonfires and dancing and hundreds of guests.”

“I’d like to,” said Napoleon. “Maybe some time you can show me one.” He paused. “There was something else, wasn’t there.”

“Yes... I’ve been called home, along with my promotion. Would you believe I’m the second youngest Vice-Admiral in the Russian Navy?”

Napoleon nodded. “You look very dashing with the sling. How’s the shoulder holding?”

“The pins are nearly solid, I’m told. Should be just as good as new in another month or two. I’ll be in some instructional position when I go back — I’ll send you my address.”

“You?” said Napoleon. “At a blackboard?”

Illya sighed. “Probably not for long. I expect to spend the next six months polishing my Manchurian dialect and studying some new techniques. I’ll probably be in China next summer. My Moscow address will stay valid, but there may be delays in forwarding.”

Joan, in a small cloud of pink, came across the grass towards them from the reception. “Napoleon,” she was saying, “I’m so glad your partner could be here.”

“Does Mom seem to accept your amnesia story? We’ve got the best medical evidence money can buy.”

“I don’t really think so, but she’s too nice to say anything. She’s just glad you’re settling down.”

“Behind a desk,” said Napoleon.

“But the big desk,” said Illya. “You’ll never get fat in that chair.”

Napoleon nodded. “I remember the last time I held it. Without Thrush working on me it should be a relative picnic. Did you see the file on that, by the way? I was code-named *’Waterloo.’* ”

“Mr Simpson has been running barefoot through the top secret research reports and filing a summary every day on the most interesting ones,” Joan said. “You can look at them all when you go back to work — not before. I talked it over with Miss Cramer. Local offices are doing fine at sweeping up and you won’t really be needed for another month or so. Mr Allison has come back to sign a few things. After all, you’re still officially on medical leave, and I expect it’ll take you at least until Christmas to recover fully.”

“Did he ever find anything on the Flin Flon Monster?”

“The what? Oh, yes, in fact he mentioned you’d be interested in that. Very disappointing. It was something that didn’t work out — they scrapped it a little later.”

Illya stood. “You’d better be getting back to the reception, Napoleon. I have a plane to catch. But first, there’s one more wedding present for you. It came to my apartment last week, and I’ve had the boys in the lab checking it over ever since. It’s absolutely nothing more than it appears. Ward and Irene Baldwin sent it.”

It was a staghorn and ebony stick, with a one-inch silver band just below the handle. On the front was engraved a tiny U.N.C.L.E. globe; on the back the legend, *“W.B. to N.S. 1970.”*

Napoleon levered himself to his feet, braced with an aluminum crutch, and took the cane in his hand. “It feels comfortable,” he said.

“One more thing I think you should know, now that it’s all over. Remember ‘Little Brother’?”

“I’ll never forget him.”

“Did you know that of those last two wires, one would have detonated the device?”

“I guessed, when you told me not to touch the other one. Whichever one wasn’t cut would set it off.”

“Not exactly. I had the mechanism worked out, you see, but I still hadn’t figured out the color-coding of the wires. It didn’t make sense. If I’d had a piece of paper, or if I’d been able to think more clearly, I might have. But I didn’t have the least idea at that point which of those wires would set it off.”

“You didn’t...” said Joan.

“Then it *did* matter,” said Napoleon. “You said cut either one.”

“No,” said Illya. “I said, ‘Cut one of them.’ That was all. I’ve worked with you for seven highly variable years, all together, and one thing I knew was that you are lucky. I don’t understand it, and I knew it didn’t work if you worried about it. But if I had chosen one of the wires and told you to cut it, my odds of success would be fifty percent, because I believe in the laws of probability. If you chose the one to cut, without being overwhelmingly aware that you would never know if you made the wrong choice, I guessed you had about a two-thirds chance of choosing correctly under the circumstances. I must say I’m glad you did.”

Napoleon sat down again. A taxi honked at the foot of the lawn and Illya looked around. “That’s for me,” he said. “Sometime again, Napoleon.” And he was gone at a trot, his left arm encumbered, officer’s cap gripped in his right hand, blond hair catching the breeze.

Napoleon stared after him. “Smart Russian,” he said, and stood to wave his free arm as the taxi pulled away. Then he turned to Joan. “Come on,” he said. “We should get back to our own reception. Leave the crutch here — I think I’ll show off my new cane.”

— the end —